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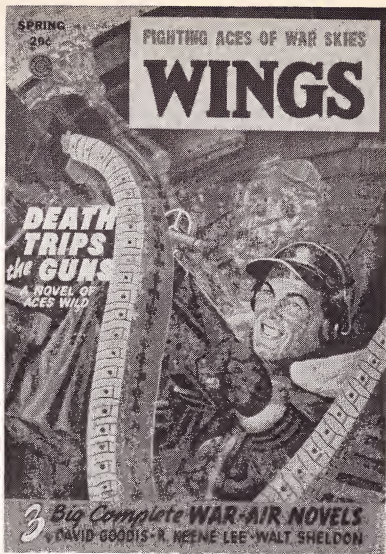
DE PINA
—
WALTON
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GARSON

VASSALS *of the* LODGE-STAR

SNATCHED FROM SPACE AND TIME
TO SERVE A CRYSTAL FLAME!

Novel by **GARDNER F. FOX**





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AN EPIC NOVEL OF SPACE AND TIME

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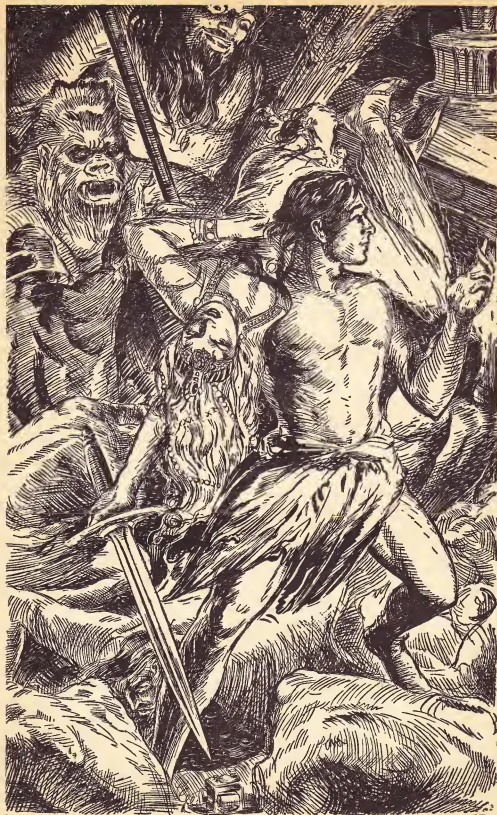


Vol. III, No. 7

20c per copy



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A scream of fear and fury tore from the throats of the fighters.

VASSALS OF THE LODE-STAR

By Gardner F. Fox

Illustrated by NAPOLI

Caught up in a mad space-time snarl, making their last grim stand against a surging android horde, the outlawed man-beasts of the Settlements could not see why mighty-thewed Thor Masterson of Terra chose instead to battle a strange green flame!

In that dim dawn of all things, when Time was unmeasured and Space was an empty void, before the strange mating of these two and the birth of the cosmos, the Rebel lived. Its streams flowed forth from unfathomable errors, seventeen-hundred billion years ago. It was a cancer of Space, and when Space met Time and flowed with it toward eternity, the Rebel fought. Time and Space sought to disgorge it, for it was the Rebel, and its own great tendrils of Space and Time heaved and raged like the corona of a giant sun. The tendrils leaped and danced, and once in a while they touched reality. And when they did . . .

THE PURPLE LIGHT CAME first, tinting the library of the old house, and flooding across rugs and books on the shelves. Then the mansion rocked and tilted as though being lifted and torn loose from its foundation.

Thor Masterson came up from his chair, brown eyes staring. His flannel shirt

opened to disclose tanned chest and thick neck. He saw the purple light, but he did not think of it as a pathway between worlds. He felt the tilting of the house, but he did not think of it as riding down the cosmic corridor through which it was being transported.

The mansion rocked and turned slowly.

If Thor could have had time, he might have tried to reason, but there was no time—

A woman stood in the center of the rug, a woman with long yellow hair and gauze trousers and jeweled girdle. A dwarf-man with a big club leaped for her, snarling. The woman whirled, a slim dagger glittering in her right hand.

Thor Masterson came alive. He drove forward. His big right fist, scarred with battles in Oregon lumber camps and wise to the ways of axes and bounding footballs and enemy jaws, swept up in a short arc.

The dwarf-man seemed to leap backward. He fell against an antique secretary, splintering wood. Slumping toward the floor, he lay still. The girl screamed.

Again the mansion was rocking and tilting, lifting and falling. A chair skidded into a corner, and a heavy picture dropped with a shattering of glass and frame.

Thor Masterson thought of hurricanes and cyclones and tidal waves. He held the girl against him, looking into her frightened violet eyes.

"Easy does it. Just take it easy. Relax. It's like skiing. If you're not stiff, you won't get broken bones."

The violet eyes told Thor that she hadn't the slightest conception of what he said, but his tones made her generous red mouth yield a tremulous smile. She relaxed and lay against him.

THOR stared out the window. There should be the elms of the Midwestern campus out there, but all he could see were pale purple mists. Thor went toward the window and peered out. Midwestern University, where Thor had come from lumber camp and battlefield, ought to be showing its greystone buildings soon. But the more Thor stared into the lavender mists, the colder became his heart.

Because, as the clouds shifted to reveal darker spaces, Thor could see stars glittering in the blackness. He thought, *Something has lifted the house right off the campus. Something has us in its grip. We're being taken away from the Earth—taken out in space.* For he knew from the star formations that he could see momentarily, that something was moving him and the house swiftly across the void.

The house bumped, pitching at a gentle

angle. The floor was like the deck of a ship caught in the trough of a wave. Thor rolled with it, legs straddled.

The front door cracked open as the house settled onto something solid. The purple mists began to flee before the pale yellow light streaming through the door and window,

Thor walked with the girl to the doorway and stood on the cracked sill, looking out. *I'm delirious*, he thought, *I've read some fantastic tale and gotten drunk, and this is the result. What I'm looking at is the chaos of a surrealist nightmare.*

Sprawling grey rock humped itself into impossible contortions under the warmth of a great yellow sun. Where the rock disappeared, red grass swayed its blades. Low mists hung in the distance.

The girl whimpered. She whispered in a language that made Thor think of jewels in a tumbling spring, clicking and clacking. He grinned down at her.

"Don't ask me, sweet stuff," he said. "Offhand I'd say that Dali had us in one of his landscapes. And you wouldn't know about him. But as far as any explanation of where we are or what happened, I'm up a tree. Still, I rather imagine that something went wrong with the space coordinates."

He went on dreamily, "We don't know an awful lot about space. Maybe it moves along with the rest of the expanding universe, and maybe it doesn't. But if a certain segment of space was addicted to going off on a tangent—away from its usual sphere—it could conceivably snatch up whatever was in its path, and sort of kidnap it. Get it, sweet stuff?"

Like a woman, she ignored everything but the one thing. Seriously she repeated, "Sweet stuff. Sweet stuff."

Thor laughed, "That's you." He touched her with his finger. She shook her head vigorously, making the yellow hair fly out fanwise.

"Karola, Karola," she said insistently. "Karola. Okay. I'm Thor."

The violet eyes were sliding over him, taking in his big frame and long legs. Thor flushed a little, reading the frank admiration in her eyes. Felling logs and playing an all-Conference grade of tackle on the football team had built up an already good physique. But the years of

logging and football and fighting had left little time for women. And Karola was a woman among women.

She laughed at him, and said something.

"We'd better take a look around," he said, carefully looking over her golden head.

HE WAS staring at grey rock as he spoke. Above it a shape took form out of empty air: It was a man, standing and staring at them. It was as though he had slid sideways out of another dimension. The man watched them with unblinking eyes. He fumbled at a red jewel that hung on a chain at his chest.

An instant later, the man was gone.

"A swell place this is, where a man appears and disappears right in front of you," he said disgustedly. "If they can come and go when and where they please, what chance have we?"

Riotous ideas of invisible men swarming about him and overcoming him capered through his brain. Unconsciously he tensed, preparing for trouble. But nothing happened. Slowly he relaxed.

"Guess they aren't coming at us, after all. He was just a look-out."

The girl was talking that queerly jewel-talk of hers.

He cut in then, "Sweet stuff, you and I are going to understand each other if we're staying together. And since I like the idea of having you around—and since I've a hunch we'll never get back to where we came from, we might as well begin right now."

Thor pointed to things and sang out his words for them. The girl listened, head to one side, nodding. She repeated after him, syllable after syllable. They wandered across the grey rock, the man bulking big alongside the woman. Thor knew it would take time, but the girl was eager. Her violet eyes flickered swiftly after his pointing finger and her mouth readily formed the words.

Suddenly Karola gasped and caught his arm with a hand that dug long nails into his flesh. "Slag!" she cried, and flung up a white arm.

Thor saw the house tilted across lava-like rocks. It looked distorted without the elms around it, and the background of grey stone university buildings. The man-

sard roof was buckled in spots as though under the sledge of a mad giant. Windows gapped without panes of glass, and rungs in split porch railings stuck up like broken teeth. But the dwarf-man leaping from the open doorway was what brought him to his feet.

The girl jabbered in alarm, but Thor grinned and waited. Not for nothing had he been born and raised in a lumber camp. He had fought men with fists and axe-handles. The club was just another axe-handle to him, a little heavier and metal-shod, but as easily eluded.

The dwarf-man halted and looked at them. He called out to the girl. Thor saw that his words calmed her, even as she showed surprise.

The dwarf-man threw the club away and knelt.

Karola frowned and tossed her long yellow hair back over her head. Thor saw she was struggling for words, that she wanted to tell him good news. He fancied that the dwarf-man was trying to make friends.

"That's all right with me," he chuckled, and went and held out his hand. After a moment of scrutiny, the dwarf-man took it.

"Slag," said Karola, touching the dwarf.

Thor studied him, seeing tremendous shoulders and, hanging from them, long arms that were heavy with red hair. Matted red locks fell to either side of bright blue eyes in a grotesquely ugly face where big nose and broad lips gave him the look of a cheery gnome. A leathern girdle was twisted around his waist. Short legs, thick with muscles, were slightly bowed.

"I'm Thor, Slag. We'll get along, you and I. But no more fighting with Karola."

The dwarf-man grunted and slapped his stomach. His gesture reminded Thor that he was hungry himself.

They walked over the barren rock. In the distance Thor could see where the stone fell away and the earth began. He began to trot. Those red grasses might lure animals to feed. And thinking of steaks cooked over an outdoors fire brought saliva to his lips.

For three hours they stalked through the red grass. And then, around a black outcropping of basalt, Thor sighted two small deer.

Slag started to run, but Thor caught him by the arm.

"The club, man. Give it to me."

Reluctantly, Slag loosened his grip. Thor glanced at the club, hefting it. It was heavy, but balanced perfectly. Often, in the Oregon camps, Thor had thrown axes at a mark, axes less perfectly balanced than this club.

He took off his shoes. In socked feet he crept nearer the deer. Thor was glad the wind was blowing away from the animals and into his face. Otherwise . . .

The club swung easily in his hand. He moved it faster, around and up. Then he flung it, shoulder and body behind the toss. Sunlight glinted from the red metal embedded in the clubhead.

The club thudded home on the temple of the nearer deer. The animal went over sidewise and lay still.

Slag gave a great cry of amazement. Looking down at them from his black pedestal, Thor felt a kinship toward the dwarf. He liked him. It had never entered Slag's head to throw his club. The blue eyes worshipped Thor, looking up at him. They made him feel good.

And the violet eyes. Thor looked down into them and liked what he saw. His hands felt the need of losing themselves in that thick tawny hair that flooded the girl's white shoulders. And that red mouth that spilled the jewel-sounds so easily was ripe for kisses.

Slag ran ahead toward the deer, but Karola waited for him as he leaped from the basalt rock. Her hand nestled in his, and her violet eyes flirted with him. Thor grinned and stepped along beside her toward his kill. What did it matter if he was somewhere undreamed of? What matter that they were worlds apart? He was a man with a woman, a man who had killed his first food. His chest rose with added power, and the muscles tingled in legs and arms.

Slag tore the deer apart with powerful hands, and Thor roasted the sweet flesh over a fire of dried twigs. As they ate, the giant sun sank low on the distant horizon. Strange stars came to life in an azure sky, twinkling and throbbing. They were queerly distorted, Thor noticed. In his astronomy classes, he had picked up a smattering of star clusters and formations,

but these he saw now, from the little hill where the fire flared, were peculiarly distorted.

"Almost as though I were looking at them through rippled glass," he said.

Under the shadow of a scooped-out rock, they slept, huddled together for warmth.

FOR MANY DAYS the three wandered across the red grasslands of the strange planet. Always they found an unbroken strata of rock crust interlayered with lush lawnland. Occasionally a herd of tiny deer swept by, and from these they made their meals.

Thor grew hard and tanned with the wild life. The muscles that had seen him through lumber camp and football field waxed even stronger. His clothes wore to thinness, and shredded in places. Slowly he learned the jewel-language, and in turn Karola grew familiar with his tongue.

He taught Slag to hurl his club, and wrestled with him when he felt the need of violent exercise. The dwarf-man worshipped him, but he entered into their games with feigned rage.

Karola told him something of her past. She was priestess of Klogor on a small planet that swung around a sun invisible from Earth. Her temple had been raided by the dwarf-men, and as she and Slag struggled before an altar, something had come and snatched them up, and whirled them around and around.

"Klogor is our god," said the girl. "I called on him, but he did not hear. I was bred into his service, but he failed me in my need."

Slag rumbled, "This is my god," and shook his big club.

"You may need it," said Thor dryly. "Look!"

They were sitting on the edge of a rock, baking in the hot sun. Below them spread the red meadows, rolling in even swells across a valley toward jagged rocks that rose high into the pale sky. In the middle of the meadow, ankle-high in the grass, three men were standing.

Karola gasped, "They were not there a moment ago."

"The invisible men," commented Thor dryly, getting to his feet. "They come and they go, and you can't see them do either."

Slag lifted his club, rumbling in his throat.

The men walked toward them slowly. They called out words. Fanning into an arc, they came on. Now their hands fell to their sides and they lifted long swords that dangled from the leather harness around their middles.

Karola pulled her long legs up under the remnants of the gauze trousers. Thor lifted her beside him with a hand. Side by side they stood, awaiting the men.

"They have swords and we only have your club, Slag," said Thor. "We want to work this together. Take the man at the left. I'll tackle him, going for his sword, while you clout him. In that way, we'll each have a weapon."

"And me?" asked Karola. "I can handle a blade. Priestesses of Klogor are taught to defend themselves."

"We'll see. They're coming head-on for us. Careful, Slag. Go for your man when I say the word."

His muscles tightened in his legs. This was like a football game, in a way. The man with the sword was a ball carrier. Thor wanted that sword more than he had ever wanted a football. He shifted his feet, balancing himself.

"Now!"

They went off the rock together, dwarf and man.

Slag brought his club around in a vicious arc. Thor slid under it, going for the arm. His fingers tightened on a wrist even as the club crunched home. The sword came free. He grabbed at it. With his hip he hit the man and drove him sideways into his companions.

Thor landed on his knees, the hilt of the blade in his right fist. He looked around him, hearing Slag yell with superstitious fright.

Karola screamed from the rock, "They've disappeared!"

The meadows held only Slag and himself. Thor shook his head, and looked at the grasses. Even against the red, there should be bloodstains visible. But the blood had gone where the men had gone.

"They don't even bleed," he said. "You sure you hit that guy, Slag?"

"Slag hit him!"

"I don't understand it. They come and go unseen. They must come from some-

where. They must have dwelling places."

He lifted a long brown arm, thickly muscled. With it, he swept the red grasslands, the grey rocks, the sky with its gigantic orb of sun. For many days they had trod this world, and always found it as they saw it now. Empty and barren, like a newborn planet.

Karola ran to catch them, and then the three walked on and on, into the sunset.

EIGHT days later, they found the Discoverer. At first Thor thought him another rock, so almost perfectly did his queer markings and sprawling, bloblike form match the stone. And then when he moved, in a peculiar, pouring sort of slide, and the electric tingles marched up and down his spine, Thor knew he was alive.

"Hallo," called Thor.

The blotched thing swung about. There were no eyes to be seen in its immense shape, but Thor knew he was being surveyed, and closely.

"You are an Earthman," ran a thought in his mind. "The woman and the man are Klogorons,"

Thor said eagerly, "You know that? Then you must also know where we are—how we came here?"

"I know, yes."

"And those men that come and go? And why we see no cities, no habitations where they live? Do you know that too?"

"The Discoverer knows everything. I am the Discoverer. I live everywhere and nowhere. Or at least I did until the madness that is this queer space lapped out at me and brought me here, just as it did you."

"To understand, you must think of the universe that you know as a big, big bubble. It is stable and steady. It has its star clusters with their space velocities and planetal orbits. Inside the big bubble everything is orderly—except one thing."

"That one thing is a very tiny bubble. A sort of cancer, you might say. It obeys no laws. Its very space coordinates and vectors are different than ours. It is fluid—always in motion. Its space segments are so alien that they can reach right through ordinary space, annihilating distance, and seize upon objects."

"But that's nonsensical," protested Thor.

The Discoverer thought-beamed, "I said it is not space as we know space. Let me

put it this way: the magnet can draw metal to it without touching the metal. So this space-cancer can attract objects by reaching out for them, drawing them toward it—through a sort of purplish mist—by some power of magnetic attraction."

Thor made a sound as if he understood, and the Discoverer went on, "The segment of the rebel-universe came through the true universe, and touched you—"

"Touched my house on the Midwesttrn campus."

"Yes. It drew you within itself—"

"But Karola and Slag! They came out of the air right in the middle of my living room."

"They were in the magnetic pull, too. And where their space and this space met, was the middle of your living room."

Thor looked at Karola, whose forehead was wrinkled in tiny furrows as she followed the thoughts of the Discoverer. Slag was off to the right, chasing a fat rabbit bounding ahead of him in terror.

The Discoverer went on, "I sought entrance to this world many eons ago. It was one of the few spots in space I had never visited. Again and again I sought to enter, but its strangely twisted space-time continuum proved too much. Always I failed.

"And then, when I was visiting—I am almost all brain and it is a habit of mine to roam a bit—I was visiting a planet of what you call the Magellanic Cluster when everything went blank and I found myself tugged through the purple space and landed here, stretched across a rock."

Thor said, "You claim you can roam, mentally. Away from your body, that is,"

"Your world would call it astral projection, in which the spirit levitates from the body and crosses distance. The high-energy potential of the mind is used to dissociate the ethereal self, with which I include the mental self, from the matter of the body."

Thor grunted dubiously, but the Discoverer went on, "I was engaged in astral projection to the Magellanic Cluster when this space lapped at my body that rested in the ruins of ancient Flormaseron. It is a form of magnetic current that did the trick. Not ordinary magnetism, but a current of it."

Thor thought of the Ehrenhaft experi-

ments and nodded. He said, "And what of this world where we are? We saw some men—"

"Not men. Androids. They are semi-human, invested by Aava with a synthetic life force."

"Aava?"

"Aava is the Green Flame. He rules this land. He is like nothing I have ever seen. He can create, to an extent. He can destroy. He has made androids to serve him, but he is limited in materials on this planet. It is mostly rock and sand. If he had enough material, he could make millions of the androids. As it is, he can, and has made only thousands."

Thor said abruptly, "Can we get back to Earth and to Klogor?"

"Defeat Aava, learn the secret of this universe and destroy it, and you may return."

"Aava. You called him the Green Flame. Where can I find him?"

Thor caught a flicker of humor in the thoughts that flooded his brain. "Would you see Aava? I will show him to you. Lie down, on your back. So. I warn you, control your thoughts. If Aava suspects he is watched, you are doomed."

Karola pressed his arm against her warm side. Her violet eyes glared in fear out of the white, lovely face. Her scarlet mouth begged, "Do not do it, Thor. I beg you. I am afraid."

"There is nothing to fear. The Discoverer sounds as if he knows what he's doing. And you *do* want to go back to Klogor, don't you?"

The girl flushed so that a delicate pale rose flooded her neck and cheeks. Her violet eyes were brilliant as her torrent of gold hair seemed to gather new brightness from the sun,

"I am not sure. It is a nice life, this roaming in open air, across great prairies."

Thor held her hand. "You wait. I'll be back."

He lay down. His last recollection was the feel of Karola's long nails pressing the flesh of his hand . . .

THOR hung bodiless in blackness. He was aware with all the five senses of him, that life teemed about and all around the blackness, that something walked and spoke and moved. Thor struggled until a

dull pain pounded and throbbed all through his being.

"Patient. Be patient," counseled a gentle voice.

"Are you the Discoverer?"

"I am he. It would be too dangerous to let you take your first mentastral flight alone. Besides, your brain has not the electrical potential sufficient to let you make progress. Hush, now. Listen!"

There were voices, deep and thunderous in a rolling wave of sound. Dim and faint at first, the paean swelled and pulsed. And as the sound grew, so came the light—at first in tiny ripples of greyness that shimmered and fled—then a refulgent glory in broad bands,

He hung above the broad walls and ramparts of a queer city, whose domes and minarets were queerly bent and twisted. The broad avenues and narrow alleys were bare. It was a dead city.

"Not a dead city. Listen!"

The song was louder, richer.

"Lower yourself. Think yourself down."

Thor found himself sweeping in a gentle arc closer and closer to the towers and temple domes. Now the song was crashing out in ponderous triumph.

"Go through the golden dome. You can do it."

Yellow metal shone and glimmered as he dropped gently through opalescent hues of gold and amber and yellow. It was like thick water, with faint bubbles glistening, locked within. He broke free and hung in the groined ceiling above a great chamber.

Hundreds of the androids with the glittering jewels on their chests stood arm to arm. Their rich voices boomed tribute toward a niche cut in the north wall, arched and wide, that held a squat black urn resting on a white alabaster pedestal.

"The song is nearly done. Watch the urn."

All sound and movement died away.

A tongue of green fire stabbed upwards out of the black urn. For one long instant it hung there, quivering and pulsing. It broke and faded into green mist that the breezes blew out across the chamber.

"That was the manifestation of Aava. Now we will see him as he really is."

They swept through the air with the

speed of light. Matter that was wall and stone and metal blurred into a liquescent dimness that darkened the further they went. From grey to black to grim jet went the colors. And still they went on. Now the colour grew light tan, like sand.

"We are in the bowels of the Mountains of Distortion. The blackness is rock hidden forever from a glimpse of sunlight. We are nearly there. Go cautiously! This buried desert is right above him."

It was a cave. From the high rock ceiling stalactites drooped like the fringes of a weeping willow eternally etched in stone. Amid a riotous profusion of clubshaped stalagmites thrusting up from the rough cave floor, lay a circle of red space.

And in the red space stood Aava.

Green light, flickering and flaring, now subdued, now pouring forth in a verdant shower of pride and strength, flooded the cave. Thor could feel its sentience through every beat and pulse of it. Like the tongue of some mighty star trapped in matter, it licked and thrust and strove to speak its greatness.

The green fire lowered, hung brooding.

"I smell men."

"Careful," thought the Discoverer.

Thor moved no muscle, took no breath in his spirit form. Yet the machinations of his mind slipped a cog. He thought, and the green flames knew.

A sword of flame lunged outward, at him. He felt its heat, the wild life of it, the pride and all the cruelty.

He tried to cry out. Then his mind went. The last he knew was the voice of the Discoverer.

"Come!"

THOR gasped lungfuls of sweet, cool air, staring up at the sun in the blue sky. Yellow hair splashed on his face and chest as Karola wept and whimpered. Wonderingly, Thor put a big hand to his face. It was beaded with damp sweat.

The Discoverer beamed a thought at him.

"That was a near thing, man of Earth. Had I not kept constant control of your mind, Aava would have had you."

"What—what is he? That green fire is alive. I could feel it. I knew its emotions."

"Aava is alive. He has been alive for

eons piled upon eons. His beginning I know not. Whether he will have an end—I also know not."

Thor shuddered.

The Discoverer went on, "Destroy Aava, and destroy his universe, and you may return to your own. But how can you destroy Aava when even I, the Discoverer, must admit failure?"

Thor shook his head. Destroy that flame? It was impossible.

When he looked up, the Discoverer was oozing a path into the distance and Karola was hugging herself to him. Thor put an arm around her, smiling grimly into her frightened eyes.

"We're in it, baby. All the way. Lost in some mad corner of space that nobody can get in or out of. Trapped. And me with an education to catch up on. Although," he grinned, looking at her thick yellow hair and large red mouth, "I'm not feeling any too scholarly at the moment. Yeah, I guess it could be worse. I guess it could."

Slag came toward them with three rabbits dangling from his right hand. He knelt and began to make a fire. Thor and Karola watched him until the roasting flesh scents reached their nostrils.

Thor laughed, "Hell. I'm just hungry. After a good meal, I'll feel better about it all."

But that meal was never finished.

The androids came in the middle of the second rabbit. One moment there was only the stars and the rolling meadowland, and the red flames making shadows on the grass and on their arms and legs. The next they were falling out of thin air, all over them, fists hitting at Slag and Thor, hands reaching out for, and lifting, a screaming, clawing Karola.

"Thor! Thor!" she cried.

Thor heaved up from under three androids. His muscles rended with the strain, but he threw them from him. His fists lashed out and thudded into rib and jaw. He clove a path through living men, dropping them with chops and uppercuts.

Karola stood writhing in the grasp of three giants. Their hands were wrapped about her wrists, and their free hands fumbled at the jewels that hung about their necks.

Thor flung an android from him;

whirled to his left, avoiding a sword thrust, hitting down with the edge of his hand against the android's neck even as he turned. His knees slid under another's knife and splintered his ribs. He heard Slag's club crunching home to his left, but all he could see was Karola with the firelight playing across legs and midriff.

"Thor! Thor! It's dark, Thor! I'm frightened!"

Her scream sent cold horror into his spine. Her white feet were almost in the fire. How could it be dark to her? Unless these fiends who came and went were blinding her—

Thor roared.

He lowered his head and charged, as some Viking ancestor might have charged a longboat's deck. His fists hammered and clubbed. He blasted a path through cursing, sobbing men.

Karola was in front of him.

He reached out for her.

Karola disappeared.

Thor felt his hands sink through empty space where Karola should have been; where she was standing, one instant before. On spraddled legs he stood, naked chest gulping in cool air, staring at the darkness.

"Karola!" he cried.

The androids were all fading. Thor dimly understood that it was Karola they had been after, seeing them drop into nothingness, one after the other. The fire flared brighter. In its red beams, one still sat, fumbling a little dazedly at the jewel on his chest. Thor knew his own thoughts were fumbling, just as the other's fingers were. Karola was gone. The androids were going, only one was left. There was no way to follow.

The firelight hung in the ruby jewel for one bursting moment, like red blood bursting. Red jewel. Fumbling fingers clawing at it. Three androids with Karola also clawing at their jewels. And Karola disappearing—

Thor leaped.

His big right hand stabbed for the ruby. He closed his fingers on it and tugged. The chain resisted, and then the android came awake to what Thor wanted and pounded at him. Thor lowered his head and chin until his jaw rested against his chest and hunched his shoulders. He rode

the buffets, swaying as he did in the ring.

Tug, tug. Tug and tear with that right hand, his mind kept telling him.

Get that jewel!

It broke and came loose in his hand. The android screamed, reaching out. Slag came over the fire with a tremendous bound and his club swung. It caved in the android's head and toppled him forward into the fire.

Thor stared at the dying green fire that spilled from the android's head. That was a part of Aava, that fire. It was the life force.

He looked at the jewel throbbing soft red fire in his palm. He grinned.

II

THE RUBY WAS THE SIZE OF A small egg. It was cut and polished until its burnished sides threatened to obscure the inner fires with their glimmerings. But deep inside the jewel was a core of flame that would never be extinguished. That flame looked purple.

Thor wondered. Purple heart of red ruby. Suppose Aava had imprisoned a jot of his immortal fire inside the ruby, as he had with the androids!

He turned it over. There was a rocking instant of vertigo, of pitch blackness and cold.

The meadowlands were gone. He was standing on a rocky escarpment that brooded over a small valley. And set in the middle of the valley, like a vision from an Arabic nightmare, was a city of elfin loveliness. Towers pointed slender spires to the sky, and hemispheric domes glowed softly in pale moonlight.

"The City of Aava," murmured Thor. "This is the place they sang the song to the urn, the city the Discoverer showed me."

His fingers tightened on the ruby. He turned it carefully.

He was back with Slag.

The dwarf-man was whining, and looking around him like a scared dog until he saw Thor looming massive in the fire-flames. He grinned and came close, shaking his club.

"You go where Karola went? Where the men come from?"

"Yes. It's a different world, Slag, but

the same. I've a feeling this ruby with the green fire in it is some sort of passport, or key, that unlocks the path into Aava's realm. It's a physical manifestation of a geometry Euclid never got around to. Dimensional worlds."

Slag grunted. "We go after her?"

"Take hold of the ruby. That's it."

Their hands held the warm jewel. Slowly they turned it. Darkness and coldness, and dizziness, and Slag and Thor found rock under their feet, and a white moon high above them.

Thor hunted for and found a narrow path of rock that twisted from the escarpment and curved downwards toward the valley. He called to Slag and they trotted Indian fashion along it.

The walls of the elfin city loomed gigantic as they crossed the sandy plain that stretched for miles in front of it. Cyclopean stones were fitted one on another until they spread up and up, seemingly toward the stars themselves. Thor felt like a midge about to attack a mastodon.

His feet kicked endless grains of dust walking along that massive barrier. Mile after mile they trudged, and found no gates.

Slag said, "How get in?"

Thor put a hand in his frayed pocket and drew out the warm ruby. He said, "This must be the only key. We haven't found any door yet."

They put hands on the jewel and moved it. They went forward over the red grasslands for a hundred feet. Thor said. "This ought to be just about right." Once more they turned the jewel, and experienced the dark, the coldness, and the vertigo.

Cobblestones underfoot, and smooth rock walls lining the streets as they crept forward. It was a dead city lying under the white moon, stark in its emptiness, sorrowful in its brooding strength. The windows were dark, the doorways shadowed.

Once Thor and Slag heard footsteps, but they came from a great distance, and soon faded into the eternal silence.

Ahead of them loomed the temple with the golden dome, where the paean to Aava had thundered forth, where the urn that held the green flame stood on its white pedestal.

"They will have taken Karola there,

to Aava," whispered Thor. "That is where we must go. To the temple of the green flame."

A massive knob of bronze, covered with greenish rot and carved with the emblem of Aava-in-the-urn, screeched as Thor turned it. The thick oaken door swung wide. Pale radiance bathed the arched columns that trod the mosaic floor of the vast chamber. At the far end of the room, the black urn stood empty and black.

Thor ran across the vast chamber, his footfalls sounding loud and lonely. He stepped to the white pedestal and peered within the black urn. Green flakes and crystal chips encrusted the bowled bottom of the urn.

He slipped a torn handkerchief from his pocket, and with the buckle of his belt, loosened some of the crystal chips.

"I don't know whether I can ever analyze these," he said to Slag, "but I'll take them along, anyhow."

Slag stood at one of the tall, arched windows, red head gleaming in the sun. He was making guttural noises in his throat, and he kept lifting and dropping his big warclub. Thor stepped to his side and looked into the streets.

Men were walking stealthily along the cobblestones.

THOR blinked and rubbed his eyes. He was staring down at men clad in chain-mail armour, men in fur skins, men in suits of the same cut as he wore. There was a huge creature that Thor would have sworn was an ape, except for the two tusks depending from its lips, and its erect, intelligent bearing. There was a four-legged being, and something that had two heads. There was—

"They are men, Slag. Real men. Not androids!"

He felt a warm delight in him, a welling of friendliness inspired by the weeks of wandering on the red, lonely grasslands. He lifted an arm and opened his lips to shout. A mental censor made him close his mouth. It would be better to wait, to see what manner of men these were who stalked the empty streets of a deserted city, before showing himself.

Thor vaulted over the stone sill, calling to Slag to follow. Side by side they crept after the group.

They went deeper into the heart of the city. By twisted alleys the stalkers went, and their furtive tread and cautious glances told Thor that they were in hostile territory. Where a building cast gloomy shadows, he ran nearer, until he could distinguish voices.

To his amazement, some of the beings spoke English. He could catch fragments of words, of phrases. Mixed with his own language were terms of the jewel-speech of Klogor. And there were other tongues, too, languages that were like the cacklings of monkeys or the shrill treble of singing birds. They were mingled together, as through the ages of common living had created a new tongue that was all of none, yet something of each.

Thor whispered to Slag, "They are after women."

"So are we. Karola."

"Yes. I wonder now—"

He stood out from the shadows and called, "I am an American."

A man in tweed suit that hung in tatters from bulky shoulders whirled and stared. His hair was pale blond, and his eyes were icy blue. Thor didn't need his, "Jove, you are!" to tell he was from England.

"Thor Masterson," he said, putting out a hand.

The Englishman chuckled, "Peter Gordon. I'm a gentleman farmer—or was, you know—from Devon. When did you get into this place?"

"A few weeks ago. How long've you been here?"

"Seven years, near as I can make it. How—how are things back—back there?"

Thor told him. Gordon opened wide eyes at news of the war. He shook his head, smiling, "It seems so far away, when you've lived here for a while. It's as though you knew no other life, Jove! War. Well, we fight a war here all the time. With the Black Priest. He and his men raid our little settlements. For women, you know. Have to raid back, naturally. Got to have women to breed kids to fight the Flame."

Gordon led Thor forward toward a group of three. One was the white-haired ape. When Thor looked into his eyes, he saw keen intelligence blazing out of black eyes. Another was a lavender-tinted man clad in broad leathern belt and kilt of dark maroon. He was from a planet named

Zarathza. The third man was a giant in a black fur mantle, who carried a spear that looked like a small Oregon pine.

"We must attack that low-walled building over there," said the Zarathzan, whose name was Tor Kan. "They keep the women in there. We don't have many weapons, as you can see. We'll lose a lot of men."

Thor thought of the robots he had fought. They didn't seem like such brilliant warriors. He said so.

The giant in the black fur grunted, "A frontal attack is always costly, even if you fought against women."

"Why attack frontally? Create a diversion, with a false attack. Then slip through the walls—"

"Through the walls? You sound like a bally ghost," smiled Gordon.

Thor lifted the ruby from his pocket and showed it to them. Their eyes bulged in awe, looking at it. "A gatestone!" whispered the Zarathzan, licking his lips. "With that we could go anywhere."

The white ape, whom Thor later learned was from Fomalhaut's fifth planet and called Yorg, drew back his lips from his big fangs. He rumbled, "Let the American hie himself and his red dwarf through the walls with a few of us. Others will storm the gates of the compound. The American can open the gates when he is inside. If," he added wistfully, "he could get us a few of the robots' weapons—"

Thor grinned, "Come on, Yorg. You and Slag and I will turn ourselves into an ordinance crew. We'll get the weapons."

They joined hands and turned the ruby.

The red grasslands were back, blowing in the breeze. The three ran swiftly forward. Yorg, who knew the compound almost as he did his own settlement, called to them to halt.

"Now turn the gatestone."

When the blackness of the dimensional barrier faded, Thor found himself in a room that was formed by a circle of grey stones. From wooden racks inset in the stone hung swords and spears, tall bows and metal-tipped arrows.

Yorg whispered, "There is almost no metal on this planet. That partially accounts for the reason that we fight with bows and arrows. To make weapons that are any more powerful you need steel and

other iron alloys. And besides, I often think that Aava only trusts his androids as far as he can see them.

"The magnetic current of the planet that drags men and women and anything it touches onto its surface must at some time or other have taken potent weapons. But if there are any, only Aava knows where they are hidden. Then too, you need intelligence to use complicated weapons. The androids possess only a pseudo-intellect."

Trip after trip the trio made, their heavily muscled arms laden with every weapon in the arsenal. Once Yorg said grimly, "If ever we had a gatestone in our possession before, things would be different today." He looked at Thor and added, "The man who owns a gatestone could rule the settlements."

"I don't want to rule anything," growled Thor. "I just want to find my woman—and have another go at Aava."

YORG had been slashing air with a sword, testing its balance. Now he lowered the point and popped black eyes at Thor, in amazement. "Another go? Have you seen Aava? And you live?"

As they carted the weapons back across the grasslands, Thor told him of his experience with the Discoverer. York listened in silence, then dropped a gigantic paw to his naked shoulder.

"Forget Aava," he counselled. "Aava is too powerful. Nothing can defeat him."

"I'm a funny guy," replied Thor. "The longer the odds, the better I fight. It's a sort of tradition in my country. The Alamo. Custer and his last stand. Bataan. Wake Island. Yeah, I'd like another try at Aava. Some of these days, I'll get around to it."

Tor Kan crooned in his throat when he fitted his palm around the hilt of a sword. Morlon, the giant in the black fur pulled his lips back from white teeth in delight as he hefted a huge bow. Peter Gordon twanged a bowstring, with, "I used to do a bit of archery in Devon. For fun, you know. I haven't forgotten how to feather a shaft."

In the shadows, the other weapons were handed out to eager hands while throats whined in battle lust.

They turned to Thor then, and stood waiting. He drew a deep breath.

"The best archers among you, do you know them? Good. You're the artillery. You stand in the shadows and shoot at any who show themselves on that wall. You others—swordsmen and spearmen—follow Tor Kan and Yorg. They'll charge for the gates. Slag and I will get inside the compound walls and open them for you.

"Listen, all of you. Listen well.

"I don't know whether any of us will ever go back to what we used to call home. Maybe there isn't any need for that. We have a world all our own, now. We can make it what we will.

"But we have to defeat Aava. Don't flinch at his name. He has you licked already if you do that. By fighting his robots, you're fighting him. They're his arms and legs. Take them away and Aava isn't anything!"

Their voices growled angry reassurances in the shadows. Weapons glinted as they were swung, shimmering in the moonrays.

"Come, Slag."

The purple light deep inside the ruby seemed to flare in mad anger as Thor held the jewel in his palm, looking down at it. Turn it slowly, turn it gently. Go into the darkness and the nothingness, to—

Thor stood inside the walls. Ahead of him was the great gate with rusted bolt, looming in the white walls like a gap between bright teeth. He leaped for the bolt and wrenched at it.

Slag came to help him. Between them they broke the rust of years, watching reddish flakes fly as the barrel-bolt turned in its groove.

An arrow plunked into the wooden door, an inch from Thor's brown hair where it hung to his big shoulders. He whirled and deflected it fellow with his sword as Slag threw wide the gates.

A horde of furred and savage fighters came roaring into the compound, swords and warclubs in their hands. Thor saw the androids swarming from the far side of the enclosure, racing to meet the invaders. Yorg grasped his arm and swung him around.

"The women," he gasped. "Hurry! We won't have much time. Those androids can only be stopped by smashing the machinery inside their skulls."

Thor ran with the white ape across the

hard flooring of the pavilion. He could hear the screams and excited cries of women beyond the inner battlements.

He hit the lock a blow that crumpled the cup-guard of his blade, but the lock broke. Yorg threw open the doors.

"Come! All you women, come!"

Thor pressed against the open gate, staring at women in rags, women naked, women in torn silks and satins. There were red heads, and brunettes, and girls with hair the color of old amber. Some were lovely, some ugly, some were furred like Yorg. They ran silently, scenting freedom.

Thor was a tall man. Standing, he looked over those tossing heads, seeking Karola. He saw her in the press, clothes almost ripped entirely away. He bellowed and shook his battered sword above his head.

He clove a path to her, swung her up on his hip, and ran.

She whimpered, "It is glorious, but useless—look!"

Thor stared toward a balcony four feet above the sunbaked floor of the compound. A giant of an android, with bristling black beard matting his red face was gesturing to three others who were bent and straining at something between them.

When they moved, Thor saw it was the black urn.

"It is Aava," Karola whispered hoarsely. "The women told me of him. And that is the Black Priest, the one they call Malgrim. He will move the urn to face us. Aava will kill all, even his own men. What are men to Aava?"

A scream of fear and fury tore from the throats of the fighters. Shrilling above it was the frightened cry of the women.

Yorg was bellowing, "The gates! Fly! Save yourselves, if you can."

It was too late. The urn was turning in the hands of the androids.

THE Black Priest cried in a strangely sweet voice for such a man, "Foolish rebels! For the last time you have dared defy the power of all-consuming Aava. This time you die! Swing the urn. Let the outlaws taste the green kiss of mighty Aava, that he may take them with him to the land of nevermore!"

The black orifice of the urn was becoming rounder as it tilted down. Deep in the rounded bowl, green fire shimmered.

Thor went forward, swinging his sword. It was not as good as an axe, but it would do. He flung it straight for the broad chest of the Black Priest, and followed it.

He saw the blade go deep into the man, saw him stagger backwards, bellowing his rage. Then Thor was reaching for the top rail of the balcony, leaping, his legs like springs beneath him.

Thor caught the top rail and used it as the pole vaulter uses his pole. His wrists turned and his hips twisted. He went up over the bar.

His feet hit the urn, with two hundred pounds of muscles and desperation behind it.

The urn tilted back.

The androids screamed as the green flame leaped outward. For one instant they hung there, as though in green mist. Their open mouths and bulging eyes were straining to escape what they tasted and saw. It was no use.

Thor knew the androids were dissolving even as he brought his left fist up to the Black Priest's jaw. The man went back, heels dragging on the balcony floor. He lay where he had fallen, motionless.

Thor went and stared into the urn. The green flame was dead, now, just glittering green stuff, like crystallized moss.

Yorg called, "Hurry, Thor Masterson. We have broken them but Aava will send more."

He swung from the balcony, a frown furrowing his forehead. There was something about that green flame—

Karola was waiting for him. She slipped her hand in his and tugged. "We mustn't stay here, Thor. You heard what Yorg said."

Thor stepped over fallen androids, with arrows and lances jutting from mouth and eye-sockets, with crushed and split-open skulls.

Thor stood in the arch of the gates and stared back at the balcony where the black urn lay tilted. That green stuff! His head was churning, trying to catch the elusive thought that dipped and darted out of reach of his mental hands. He shook his head.

"There's something about Aava—"

"Thor, please. There isn't time. Yorg says at any moment Aava will send androids to surround us. They will fetch other urns. We will die."

He snapped awake to the knowledge that he was walking with a frightened Karola behind the others, that ahead of him the women and the men were running. They had gone through the gates and were spreading out over the streets and alleys of the cyclopean city.

"Yorg! Tor Kan! Gordon!"

The Englishman heard him, came to him through the press, his longbow strung with a ready arrow.

"Jolly brush, what? Found I haven't lost my eye for a target. Got thirty of the blighters, myself."

Thor said, "We'll never escape Aava in his city. There's only one chance. We have to use the gatestone, and scatter. Can you get the others?"

Peter threw back his head and sent a shrill cry ululating across the streets. The men and women paused, looking back over their shoulders. Gordon waved an arm. Fearfully, the listeners began to return.

Thor lifted out the ruby, told the others to grasp it, as many as possible. He said, "Once we get into that other world, it will be easy for us to lose ourselves. Aava and his Black Priest do not know we possess a gatestone. They will search for us here in the city. While they hunt here, we will be far away."

Kor Tan rumbled, "Good. We will find our way as close as possible to our settlements. Then you, Thor Masterson, will find us with that ruby."

Hands stretched out. The ruby turned.

IT DID NOT take long. A ruby will turn swiftly in a steady hand, making many trips with people eager to be saved from the green blast of Aava. There were some who had not heard Peter Gordon call, and they stayed behind in the city. But the great majority of them were taken through the dimensional door by the red ruby, and set down on waving grasslands and bleak rocks.

With the red grasses brushing his ankles, Thor said, "We cannot search for the others. Aava will have his androids in the streets. Scatter now. Make your way toward the settlement. Gordon, will you come with us? I don't know my way to the settlement of yours."

"Glad to, Masterson."

Slag, Karola, Thor and the Englishman

watched the others walk swiftly to the four corners of the horizon.

Gordon said, "We'd better take the most roundabout way I can think of. It will take us longer, but it will be safer. You have the gatestone. No one must get you."

They travelled swiftly and lightly for four days. Peter Gordon brought down juicy rabbits with his arrows for food, and taught Slag to use his weapon. With the wild man's aptitude for arms, the red dwarf was swift to learn.

On the morning of the fifth day, Thor Masterson went ahead of the others to scout. He strode up over massive rocks, to reach the summit of a small hill from which to look into the next valley.

When he reached the top, he halted in amazement.

A SHIP rested on black rock, tilted over. On the rotted white sail, there was the remnants of a dragon's head worked in red. From the prow, with its upreared serpent's neck and gaping jaws and forked tongue, to the stern where a broken rudder lay across the rock, it was every inch a Viking ship. A few shields still hung on the wooden sides. The mast, splintered, stood at a dangerous angle from the sloping deck.

Thor went up the rudder-stick and clambered over the side.

A skeleton lay near the helm, a vest of rusted-through chain-mail pooled on the white bones. A little in front of what had been a hand, lay a great axe.

Thor grinned, seeing that axe. He reached for the ivory haft, lifted and swung it around his head.

He staggered.

The pain was unbearable, there in his side. He reached down, felt in his pocket. His fingers closed on the ruby.

With a curse, he flung the jewel from him. His palm still stung from its icy coldness. The ruby hit the deck and bounded across the ancient planks. It rolled to a stop near a shield.

Thor stared at it.

The ruby was changing, right there in front of him. It pulsed and throbbed with the light inside it. Its red hues gave way to deep, royal purple; an angry purple.

Thor was nearer. He could see the beat and heave of the Green Flame, trapped in

the crystallized alumina. It waxed and surged, as though battering against its jeweled walls.

"Aava!" he whispered.

"Of course, Aava. Did you think I put parts of my immortal self in these bits of stuff to pass the time? They are myself; I, them. It is my method of keeping watch on all my planet. I am with every andruid who carries a gatestone, if I so will."

Thor lifted the axe; he looked from it to the ruby, at the greenish fire flaring within it.

"No use," Aava thought-waved at him. "You cannot harm me, just as I cannot harm you—in this form. I have been searching for you. You invaded the Cave of Life with the Discoverer. You stole a gatestone. You raided my arsenal and woman-stockade. You assaulted the Black Priest. You overturned Aava in the urn. A long list for one man."

There was silence. Above his head, Thor heard the rotting sail flap dismally in the slight wind. He shifted and a plank creaked underfoot.

Aava went on, "But I am a patient being, and kind. I bear no ill will. Become my man, you who call yourself—what is it—Thor? You will not regret your move."

Thor thought of Karola's golden hair and red mouth, of Peter Gordon and his bow, of Slag, of Kor Tan, of white Yorg. They and the others were depending upon him. They needed him and his gatestone to return them to their settlements and safety and peace.

He shook his head, gripping the war-axe tighter.

Aava chuckled, "You *are* an idiot, aren't you? Oh, I can read your thoughts. It isn't hard for someone who's spent an untold eternity of eons living by one's self. You train yourself to do things... You have loyalty in your heart. You love this woman with the yellow hair.

"But what is one woman? What are casual friends? I can give you more than that. I can give you anything you want.

"Permit me to demonstrate. Turn the gatestone."

The sail flapped louder in the breeze. A shaft of sunlight glinted on the edge of a shield fastened to the side of the longboat. Thor bit his tongue inside his mouth. It came home to him suddenly, with the force

of a powerfully swung sledge, that he was trapped irrevocably.

The outlaws who fought Aava needed the gatestone to get to their settlements. He had the gatestone, but Aava was alive and awake, inside it. Whenever and wherever he used it, Aava would know. The settlements would no longer be secret. If he used the gatestone to transport the outlaws home, he would be leading an army to slay them!

Thor growled in his throat.

Aava laughed softly. He urged, "Turn the gatestone. Let me show you the wonders I could give a man like you, were he to be my friend, I want a friend, a strong friend. I do not trust my androids overly. They are only pseudo-life. Besides, there are too few of them to build an empire with. Lack of materials to make them has hampered me.

"Will you be my friend, Thor?"

Thor blinked. The insidiously sweet voice was working its will on him. He found himself thinking about those wonders and those marvels. Why not? What allegiance did he owe Gordon and the rest? Karola now, that was different. And Slag.

"You may have your woman, if you want her after I show you—my brand of woman!"

"It is a trick!" Thor rasped,

"What trick? What harm can I do you inside this jewel?"

That was true enough. If worst came to worst, he could always stuff the ruby into his pocket and get away. Aava couldn't see where he was going inside a dark pocket. He could see only when he was out in the open, such as he would be when Thor used the ruby as a gatestone.

"Use it, man."

Thor bent and held out his hand toward the red gem. It winked and flirted with him with its gorgeous purple hues. It was no longer cold with the iciness that stung. It was warm, with the heat of a human body. His fingers closed on it. The ruby throbbed softly, like a living heart.

"Now—turn me!"

GONE was the ship with its flapping sail and ancient planking. Gone was the sea of grass and the broken rocks. Thor almost dropped the ruby, staring.

A fey city stood not one hundred feet from him, set on the hard sands. It glowed with the creamy luminescence of alabaster where sunshafts struck its white walls and domes and needled spires. Crimson bands, interlaced with black, formed patterns of eerie loveliness against the whiteness. Inside its walls a chorus of sweet voices chanted with ensorcelled harmony.

The red doors in the wall swung open.

Chariots drawn by great black stallions raced toward him. Standing behind the hooped fronts were women of exquisite loveliness, their hair streaming behind them, whips held in red-nailed hands. They sang as they came, a song of sounds that stirred the senses.

"This is yours, Thor. All yours."

"It is unreal. It is too lovely to be real."

"It is real."

The lead chariot slithered on the sands, powdering Thor's ankles with grit. The black stallions reared, their hooves slashing at air.

The girl in the chariot caught Thor's eyes with hers, and laughed. She tossed the reins aside and stepped from the tail-board. Her red hair hung to her waist in back, and was powdered with silver dust. She held out white hands to Thor.

Thor reached out and grasped her hands. They felt real. And looking into her brown eyes, seeing all the beauty of her in gauze skirt and white linen cloak worked with a border of red and black interlacing, he almost felt his doubts vanish.

His fingers rubbed at her hand, twisting the flesh. That was real flesh. The girl seemed to catch his thought, for she came nearer and pressed herself to him.

"Kiss me, and know," she breathed.

Her mouth was warm and clinging. After a while she drew away and laughed, "Well?"

"You're real."

Aava whispered, "All yours, Thor. Go with her. Let her show you the city that is yours, that belongs to the friend of Aava."

He thought of Karola waiting with Slag and Peter Gordon. He felt the warm hand of the red-haired girl tug him. Her red mouth blew him a kiss. Her voice murmured cloyingly, "Come, Thor. Come to your city, and your throne." Karola seemed far away, forgotten.

Behind the black stallions, the chariot swept on toward the city. It rode smoothly, easily over the sun-baked sands. The red walls came nearer, nearer. Now he was under them, and inside the city.

Balconies on either side of the broad avenue were hung with banners and rich draperies. Men and women in red and yellow and purple garments laughed and tossed flowers at him, on the backs of the horses, into the street before him.

"Thor! Lord Thor!" they cried with delight in their voices, and awe and worship in their eyes.

The girl leaned into the hook of his arm. She said, "This is your city, Lord Thor. These are your people."

He looked into her brown eyes.

"And you?"

She put her mouth to his and left it there while the chariot thundered over roses and carnations and the pavement of the streets. Later she whispered, "Stalyl is yours, too." And Thor rode with chin held high, and pride in the set of his shoulders.

Before great doors of carved quartz the chariots came to a stop. Stalyl walked with Thor between the doors, her hip brushing his, her fingers wrapped around his fingers.

Alabaster pillars rose from an alabaster floor toward a red alabaster ceiling. Sunlight poured molten pools on the floor through tall windows. At the far end of the massive hall, on an oval dais of iridescent opal, stood a gigantic jewel, carved in the semblance of a throne.

"Lord Thor—your throne," said Stalyl softly.

He went and sat on the cold edge of the massy carnelian, fingering scarlet arms. In front of him, Stalyl clapped her hands, and young girls garbed in trousers of striped satin led giant men by chains around their necks. The men bore caskets in their hands.

Girls and men knelt before the throne. The caskets were placed in an arc before Thor.

Stalyl went to the first casket, threw back the cover.

Thor choked. It was filled to the brim with diamonds, diamonds that shimmered and glittered in the sunlight. Stepping down, he reached out a hand and dipped it into the jewels. He bore a handful, star-

ing at them. Cut and polished with expert care, the diamonds were white fire against his palm.

Aava spoke, casting a thought at him from the depths of his pocket, "You like what I have prepared for my friend, Lord Thor?"

Thor drew out the ruby and held it free in his palm, staring from ruby to diamonds. "This is my price, eh, Aava? I sell my friends for these jewels?"

The purple hues of the ruby grew cloudy, as though with hurt. "Who spoke of selling your friends? I ask no traitor to come to me. I want the friendship of a true man."

Stalyl moved closer, touching his arm. Her red hair was a flaming halo around the white, red-lipped face. Her brown eyes burned at him. She was a living witch's spell of beauty and desire. Her nearness made Thor tremble.

He opened one hand, and diamonds tinkled on the mosaic floor. He reached out for the girl, seeing her lips beckon.

The ruby flared warmer, hot with pride. It dragged Thor back to reality, drumming alarms into his core. Danger, danger! With a wrench he tore his gaze from Stalyl; looked at the ruby, saw the green fire beating up with delight.

Thor tottered.

He knew, now. Somehow, in some strange manner—

Aava had triumphed!

III

THE ROTTING SAIL FLAPPED and bellied over his head. He stood again on the longboat deck. Out there, all around him, was the red grassland. Gone was the city of alabaster and the red witch, Stalyl. A myth. An hallucination. A mirage of temptation.

In their place—

Androids!

Thor drew his lips back from his teeth and flung the ruby from him. But, as it twisted in air, Aava cried, "A trick, Thor. But just a trick to test you. Pay no heed to the androids. They are here to lead us back to the city of the Urn. I tell you—" Thor caught his war-axe where it rested against the helm. He shook it at the ruby.

"You foul liar!" he rasped. "You hyp-

notized me. You showed me things that existed only in your mind. All right, I'll play your little game. But I'll show you things, too. And the things I show you will be real. Real, like death, Aava!

"You don't know what death is, do you? But you'll learn. I'll find a way. I'll pay you back—"

A lance sang in the air as it slid over his head. The androids were closer, hemming him in. They began to clamber up the sides of the ship.

Aava said swiftly, "You can make the dream come true, Thor! With you to help, I shall build a city of alabaster, make it lovely as the one I showed you.

"And Stalyl! We will create her, you and I. We will make her as lovely as the Stalyl I showed you. Far lovelier than any woman—"

"You lack materials! Otherwise you would have made more androids to fight the outlaws!"

An android hurdled the rail. Thor stepped forward, swung his axe. The keen edge bit through hair and skull.

Thor grunted, "This is the opening move, Aava. I'll find a gambit to beat you. I'll checkmate you yet."

The axe bit and dug at climbing androids, toppling them. Thor aimed always at the heads, for that was swift annihilation. Android after android dropped under the slashing impact of the double-edged Viking weapon. Thor used it with a full swing, letting the weight of his body add the impetus, learning that the perfect balance of the axe was manageable with a twist of the wrist. His hand on the ivory haft changed course and the edge drove home; it swerved, and the axe dipped under a sword to cut upwards through a jaw.

He spoke no more to Aava, though he felt the blazing green gaze fastened on him where he held the Viking deck. He used his wits for fighting.

After a while Thor dropped the tip of the axe to the deck and grinned at Aava, "You didn't send enough androids. Take a look!"

He held the ruby at arm's length above his head. The deck and sides of the ship were littered with sprawled bodies, with broken springs and gears spilling from crushed and severed heads.

Aava sighed, "It is hard, using androids.

They are good servants, but they lack one thing. They lack initiative. They can't think."

Thor brought the ruby down, grinning mirthlessly into its depths. "How long have you lived, Aava?"

"I am immortal. I always was."

"You will die, some day. I will kill you, myself."

"Nothing can kill me, Thor."

"I will."

"Nothing can kill—"

Aava checked. Thor felt the cunning of the green fire, beating up through the crystal layers of the jewel. He whispered, "Nothing can kill—*what?* What are you, Aava? What is your secret?"

"You will never learn."

Thor shrugged and knelt. With his fingers he pried up a rotting board. There was a beam-joint beneath it. Thor placed the ruby in the crotch of the joint and stared down at the jewel, knowing the wild rage of Aava.

"I must leave you here—in darkness, Aava. I can't take you with me. If I did, you would see all I am going to do to whip you. You understand that?"

"Thor, be my friend!"

He shook his head, "I cannot. I do not trust you, Aava."

"The androids were not to fight you—"

"Yet they did."

Thor checked, peered closer. The purple hue of the ruby was fading. The gem was tenantless. Aava was gone.

Thor stood up and kicked the plank into place. He filled his lungs with crisp air. He knew what he must do. He had to learn all he could about Aava. If Gordon and the others could not help him—

There was always the Discoverer!

Thor dropped over the longboat side and went striding off into the grasslands.

IT WAS NIGHT when he found the campfire, Karola came running, hearing his shout, her yellow hair streaming behind her. Thor caught her, held her close. He thought of Stalyl, and there was remorse and tenderness in his kiss.

She felt his mood. Head tilted, she looked at him and whispered, "What is it? Where did you get that axe? And your eyes—there is a little sorrow in them. Why, Thor?"

"I will tell you, darling. But I must tell the others, too. I want Gordon's advice."

Gordon wrung his hand and then held out some cooked meat on the point of a sword. Thor was famished. He sat with legs crossed before him and ate and ate. Karola sat close to him, watching him with her large violet eyes. Once in a while she touched the great waraxe, running the pink tips of her fingers along the fresh scratches on the steel.

Thor dug his greasy fingers into the sand, powdering them; then he rubbed them dry.

"I talked to Aava," he said slowly. "He came into the gatestone that I carried. He tempted me. I—almost yielded."

The others stared at him. Thor fastened his eyes on the heart of the fire, where the twigs and dried grasses glowed bright red. It was easier, looking there, to tell his tale, than to look into the eyes of his friends.

HE concluded, "I do not have the gatestone now. I left it there, in the ship. Otherwise, we would have Aava with us, with every move we make. And Aava is what we are fighting. The odds are bad enough, without taking your enemy into your confidence."

Thor raised his eyes. He looked at Karola. He said, "I am sorry. Say that it's all right."

To his surprise, she laughed. Her violet eyes poked fun at him. She whispered, "No woman can compete with a dream. Stalyl was only that. At the same time, a dream cannot compete with a living woman. I am a living woman." She leaned over and kissed him gently, then sat back.

Peter Gordon said slowly, "What can we do now? It's a rotten situation. The others expect us. If we can't find a way to return them to the settlement—" He broke off, shaking his head.

Thor slid his hand up and down the stained ivory haft of the axe. He said, "The androids came into this dimension with the use of a gatestone. If we could find it, we could use that one. All the robots were killed, but I saw no gatestone."

"Perhaps the Black Priest used one to transmit them into this world. Then there wouldn't be any gatestone at all," said Gordon.

Thor opened his eyes, and blinked. He got to his feet, lifting his axe. "There's a chance. Aava will send someone to get the gatestone I hid in the ship. Then, if he should return to the gatestone—or we can get us one from an android—there might be a chance."

Peter Gordon drew his bow toward him and strung it. "Let's go," he said gruffly.

They went in the dark of the night, when the moons were below the horizon. Thor led, trotting swiftly with the long Indian stride an old Cherokee had taught him. Karola and Slag ran side by side. Peter Gordon, bow in hand and fingers touching the string of it, loped far behind, eyes continually moving.

Hour after hour they ran. Over rolling grassland, with only an occasional clump of rock formation to break the barren monotony of the dark landscape, they went at a deceptive pace.

Thor almost went by the ship. It was easy to lose trail here, where no trees ever grew. But the moons were sweeping up, and in their light a shield-boss winked to the left. It was enough. Thor swung about and when he grew nearer, he could discern the high rock and the curved hull of the longboat looming black against the sky.

He went up the rudder, without waiting for the others.

A sword flashed.

Thor went back on his heels, his shoulders hitting empty air. The axe in his right hand came up, almost of its own volition. Steel met steel, and sparks flared.

Malgrim loomed burly and huge, his beard bristling. The Black Priest chuckled, "What Aava did not do, I will do!" As he spoke, he was bringing his blade around in a mighty, whistling swing.

Thor was rammed against the low shield-wall that dug into the backs of his knees. There was no room to move, no space for footwork. Malgrim's flat blade caught him alongside the head. Thor went over the low shield-wall into roaring blackness.

How long he lay there, helpless, he did not know. But it was the scream tearing from Karola's throat that brought him staggering up against the musty old hull.

There was no time to find the rudder. He seized a trailing, rotted line he had not seen before and swarmed up it onto the deck.

Malgrim had Karola, afar off on the prow. She must have been the next one to reach the boat, had leaped lithely aboard—and now the Black Priest had her. His blade was high and starting to descend.

Thor groaned. No time! Karola screamed and clutched at Malgrim's gatestone, chained around his neck. Malgrim, sword still poised aloft, roared and beat at her tiny hand.

Then Thor saw the axe. With a sob he snatched it up. Once before, he had thrown a weapon at that monster. Now he hefted lovingly a thing so like the double-bitted axe of the North woods. Remembering, he swung the axe full circle—and threw.

Once again, the sword steadied for its downward slash. And then the axe thudded home in the base of Malgrim's skull—the spike between its blades biting deep. There was the sharp *ting* of breaking metal. A stricken look burst in the Black Priest's eyeballs as he lurched and staggered. He fell forward, left hand reaching for the gatestone that hung on his chest.

He was blurring even as Thor reached him.

Thor thrust his hand into the coldness and the utter darkness and caught the ruby. He wrenched. There was a queer sliding motion of the Priest's body, and the ruby came free. But the Black Priest was gone.

KAROLA swayed against Thor. They stood tightly together for a moment.

"Jolly nice going," said a voice.

Peter Gordon swung a leg over the shield-wall and came toward him. "We watched from the grass. You can play that axe like a Norse raider. Got his gatestone, eh?"

Thor handed it to him. "This means we split up. You go your way, to the settlements. I go a different route."

"Man, you don't know the way!"

"I'll find it."

Thor went and lifted a rotted plank. The red gatestone still lay in the crotch of the beams, winking at him. He took and put it in his pocket. "Now, if Aava hunts us, one of us will still get through the barriers."

Thor put an arm around Karola's waist and held her against him. He said, "This is a Viking longboat. It is from a past day in the history of my planet."

Peter Gordon murmured, "What queer things this space of Aava has snatched from the universe. I wouldn't be surprised to learn, when all our chips are in, that a great many disappearances on Earth are due to this place.

"Remember the *Cyclops* that went off the face of the ocean in 1920? And do you recall the *Copenhagen*? And, back in 1755, a quay with a lot of people on it just puffed out of existence, disappearing all at once, in Lisbon, Portugal. There have been other disappearances from the Earth, None perhaps as sensational as those I mentioned.

"There's something wrong with this world we're in. It doesn't hew to a lot of natural laws we know."

Thor said, "There are no trees. Just rock and sand."

"Mean anything to you?"

"I'm not sure. There's something tugging and pulling in my mind, but it hasn't caught hold yet. And the weapons we use. Bows and swords and axes. There isn't a modern weapon in the lot."

Gordon grimaced. "Aava and his androids get the loot of the worlds, you know. They grab whatever drops on the planet. If he found guns or worse, he might horde them somewhere. The androids do not have the intelligence to use them. Besides, Aava doesn't trust his androids."

"Yes. Well, we do all right with what we have. But that thought in my mind—I want to follow it up. Karola!"

"Yes, Thor?"

Her violet eyes smiled into his. He kissed the tip of her nose. "You go with Peter and Slag."

"Oh, no, darling. I don't want to leave you. I—"

Thor squeezed her hand. "This is serious business, sweet stuff. I want to find the Discoverer. He has a method of transportation, Peter, that's a dilly. He calls it astral projection."

Gordon looked interested, icy blue eyes lighting. "I've read up on that, you know. It's some sort of yogi business. Certain Eastern fakirs claim to be able to do it. You know, he sits down and pays his brother a visit one hundred and some odd miles away. That sort of stuff.

"I've often thought that mental telepathy was a form of fumbling astral projection.

The Duke University experiments proved amazingly accurate. And then there were the Sherman and Wilkins tests."

"I remember those. They worked quite well. I see what you're driving at. You think that the human mind is a sort of sending and receiving set, that it can communicate—"

"Communicate at first, then travel. That would explain your Discoverer."

"If he could teach me to travel that way," Thor mused, "we might really get somewhere against Aava."

Suddenly he bent and kissed Karola, and pushed her toward Gordon. "Take care of her, Peter. You too, Slag. I'll find you, somehow, sometime soon."

He dropped over the side of the longboat and waved an arm at the three black silhouettes that stared down at him. Then he turned and, as nearly as he could judge, went loping across the grasses in the direction in which he had last beheld the Discoverer.

THOR did not find the Discoverer for three days. And then it was the Discoverer who found him.

He came out of sleep one morning, with the mists all around him and the warm rock under him to stare at the great bulk of the sprawling being that lay and watched him. Thor sat and rubbed his eyes. He got to his feet.

"I have been hunting you, Thor Master-son. Astrally, that is. I found you two days ago, but we were far apart."

"And I—I hunted you. I want to learn about Aava. I—"

"I can help you. Some time after you left me, I began experimenting with my astral projection technique. I learned that, chronologically, I was not hampered in the least by normal bonds. Back on my home planet of Flormaseron, I was not hampered by the bonds of space, but the barriers of Time limited me. I could not go far into the past, nor far into the future. Here, I can do either."

"You can't call that witchcraft," Thor went on. "There is a science to it, but we just don't know the rules of that science. Just as, back in Roman days, atoms existed even if the Romans didn't know of them."

"There are some laws," said the Discoverer. "You have the beginning of them.

You can launch your mind from your body and see what occurs elsewhere. Come, Thor. Lie down. I want to show you what happened here in the space of the green flame billions of years ago."

"Will that help me to conquer Aava? I want to visit him now, to learn what he does, what he plans—"

"I do not know whether it will help you conquer him, but it might help you understand him. And understanding is usually a prerequisite to any form of victory."

Thor lay back on the warm rock, moving his head slightly to find a more comfortable pillow on the hollowed rock. His arms he dropped to his sides, relaxing all through his big body. His chest rose and fell more slowly. His legs flattened against the stone. He closed his eyes and lay quiescent.

"Relax still more," whispered the Discoverer. "Sink deep, and deeper still. You must sever all bonds with your flesh. Sink—"

He was going down and around into a bottomless vortex of darkness. He fought to get down into the heart of that fancied whirlpool, down where its own power could drag him free. He fought, and struggled, fiercely.

He reached it. He hung in sunlighted air, looking at his prone body near the slumped mass of the Discoverer.

"Good. You did that all yourself, I think now you may do that without my help. But we waste time. Rise with me!"

An invisible tentacle touched him, flooded him with power. He rose high into the cloudless blue skies of Aava's planet, soaring sunward. Beneath him the red grasslands and grey rock spread out in vast splendor.

Soon now he was high enough to see the great globe that was the planet in all its entirety, slowly revolving. Out in space, in the vast distances between the suns, he floated bodiless. The planet receded, became a dot.

"Now we will go back, far in Time."

"How?"

"Think and will it. Your astral self, your *ka* or twin-soul, is a creature of mind, not matter."

Thor thought, hanging there in black space. And, as he thought, with each bit of energy he threw into his will and into his brain, there was a change.



He sought to turn and flee.

The suns and the planets were moving. They sped like balls batted across a net by hundreds of players. They slid in ancient grooves, rotating and retreating, going back the paths of their orbits. A ball of raging fire looped at them. Thor paused in instinctive dismay; he sought to turn and flee, dreading the vast sun coming at him. "Move not. It can not harm you."

He was in the midst of a roaring red inferno, feeling nothing of its annihilating heat. An instant later it was gone, raging gustily down the tracks of Time.

Thor stared. There were fewer stars now, only a couple of hundred of parsecs away. This universe was retreating away from him.

"We must follow!"

"No need. They will return."

"But an expanding universe means that it will be retreating now, going back to ultimate beginnings—"

"Our universe—the universe of Earth

and Flormaseron—is an expanding universe. But here, in Aava's worlds, there is no room for expansion. This is a finite universe, gigantic, but rimmed with some strange force that keeps it separate from our universe.

"Here the suns and planets rotate around each other, but at the same time they revolve inside this space. They traverse this great bubble thousands of times through the ages. Watch. You will see them return."

Thor hung there, in utter blackness. And then, far and faint, in the opposite direction from which the suns had gone, they came. At first they were pinpoints, then dots. They came nearer, great fiery orbs.

"Two hundred million years have passed, Thor Masterson. Let us drop down, toward the planet of Aava."

There was only one vast desert of sand facing them, as they hovered above the surface of the slowly revolving planet. Dunes a hundred miles high, whipped with

savage and incessant winds. They saw sandstorms that were titanic in their fury.

"Sand," thought Thor. "Mile after mile of silicon dioxide."

"Drop down. Go through the sand."

Grayish granules all around him, bringing the sensation of suffocation until he grew used to it. The gray darkened and grew black as pitch.

"Rock," whispered the Discoverer. "Be cautious, now."

They slid from the blackness into the green light. This was a cave, seemingly endless. Embedded into walls and sides, glittering and sparkling, were bits of onyx, carnelian, opal and amethyst. Thor caught his breath at the iridescent wonder of the jewelled cavern.

"Far off, Thor, to the right. Look there."

Brilliant green fire, rising and falling. Alive, and waiting.

"Aava!"

"Careful. Think not so harshly. He will be aware of you. Come. It is time to go."

They went back, high into space.

Once again the planets and the stars left them alone, and again they came. But this time the planet Aava was molten, filled with shooting flames, burning with white, silvery flames.

Thor and the Discoverer went down into the bowels of the planet, seeking Aava. They found the green flame burning with brilliance in a sea of molten rocks. It leaped and danced, and gathered bits of matter around it, as though weaving a garment for itself.

"That is the oval in which we saw him encased," said Thor.

"Pure quartz. When hot, it goes cherry-red."

"This is four hundred million years ago. He is truly eternal."

There was amusement in the Discoverer's mind as he said, "We will go back even further, back to the remotest beginnings. And even then, Aava was."

EIGHT-TIMES the universe came to them and receded. At last they stood in utter darkness, for a long time. There were no stars, no suns. There was emptiness.

"We are in the very dawn of all things. We are so far back that there is no Time, no Space. Only emptiness."

"If there is nothing, what are we here for?"

"Wait."

Faint rosy shafts of light streamed up from nothingness, incredible distances away. The light bathed them, sent tingles of electrical power throbbing through their beings. Although he was only brain, Thor felt that force. It was something from beyond, godlike.

Where there had been emptiness, was now matter. Here and there were stars.

"Is this creation?"

"Call it creation. Call it a life-force coming from somewhere that our animal minds can never fathom. Say the force gathered the floating electrons and bound them into balled suns. And in one of the suns, we will find what we seek."

They hunted through the weird wonders of this weird universe. And deep in the heart of a gigantic star that pulsed and threw its forces hundreds of thousands of miles high, they saw it.

A green blob, restlessly burning, circling within itself, like a fluid always in motion. Cradled and warmed by the heat of the star, given not only existence, but life itself by the rosy shafts of light, was Aava.

"Not eternal. But almost so."

"Master of this cancerous universe, this alien from known Time and known Space. Remember, the only thing that penetrated the force-shell around this space-cancer was the light, the rosy light."

"Aava is not absorbed by the sun."

"He is different."

"And being composed as we are composed would be gone in less than a fraction of a second, in that heat."

The Discoverer whispered, "Is that knowledge any help to you, Thor Master-son?"

"I don't know. The idea in the back of my head, that hammered away at me ever since I met Aava—I almost have it. It is there, if I can find a way to—"

Loneliness!

Hanging in this space, hundreds of millions of years from his body, Thor Master-son was alone.

"Discoverer! Where are you? Speak to me!"

There was empty silence.

Thor wondered. He was not afraid, for fright is a bodily thing, where the heart

pumps faster and the skin grows white while the blood is sucked into the belly. This feeling was different.

He knew he was alone, that something had happened to the Discoverer. He called and received no answer.

Can I return? Thor asked himself. Can my mind span the countless eons between my body and my brain? He had learned all he could, out here in the beginnings of things. It was time to go back, now.

He took thought, calmly and dispassionately. There was no panic in him. He was a child with a new toy, turning it and examining it, feeling it bend to pressure, putting it to mouth to know its taste. Slowly he forced his brain into patterns, forming it with mental energy, twisting it into different shape.

Thor had to go forward in Time, swiftly. He must learn what had happened to the Discoverer, quest after Aava. He thought, and in thinking, found a new delight.

How long he hung there in the black voids, he never knew. But up from darkness came a white ball of flame that was Aava's planet, with its sun and attendant moons. They circled in darkness, weird and eerie in their iridescent brilliance.

I have succeeded, he reflected. That is the planet, bubbling with molten rock. Inside that sphere, Aava is fashioning a garment for himself, moulding it from crystal quartz. Somewhere on the other side of the universe, the sun that held him spewed him out, with the nucleus for his planet and its moons. I am speeding into the future.

Again and again Aava's planet and its sun and moons returned, to flee across the gulfs of space. Ten times they came and went; the last time, Thor knew he would have to wait no longer.

He dropped toward the planet as it circled its sun. He swept through heavieside and stratosphere. He plummeted into fluffy cloudbanks. Beneath him he could see red grasslands and bare rock. Across one rock was slumped the massive form of the Discoverer.

To one side of the Discoverer lay the body of Thor Masterson. The brain that was part of that body entered it.

There was coldness and a sense of numbness. He could not move a muscle.

Thor sent relays of orders along his nerves into every part of his body. A muscle twitched. He opened his eyes.

It took time, returning from such a journey; but at last Thor could move his arms. He rubbed his chest and loins, massaged his legs. Weakly, he stood up.

"Discoverer!"

It was a cry of anguish. The blob of jellied flesh lay seared and burned. Little blisters covered the massy body like globules of sweat. Where the blisters were greatest, the outer mass of the body was broken open into crevices, like the cracks in a human brain,

"Aava did this," whispered Thor. "They brought him in the urn, and he killed the Discoverer. And he spared me. That was a blunder."

It occurred to him that he was granted life because Aava thought he could use him. "He'll see. I'll show him what I can do."

Raging, he brought out the gatestone, staring at it. "You hear me, Aava? I'll get you yet. I'll find a way to beat you. There must be a way. There has to be a way!"

The ruby lay, warmly glowing. Aava was not inside its red crystalline substance. Thor closed his fist on the ruby and shook it back and forth. He culled oaths from lumber camp and battlefield. He swore them all.

He spent himself, there on the red grasslands. Dry-eyed, but grieving, he put out a hand and touched the blistered body. He whispered a farewell under his breath and turned his head to the north.

ALL NIGHT LONG Thor went at an easy lope across the plains. Just as dawn came up with red lances of light across the horizon, he stopped and turned the gatestone.

"If he wants me, he'll have to find me," he said. "I'll lead him a chase that—"

The rest choked off in water. He was in blue depths, in cold clear water that was so transparent he could see a shimmering forest of crimson coral and white sands far below him. Thor swam upward, aided by the natural buoyancy of his big body.

He treaded water a hundred yards from a shore where dead bodies lay scattered like leaves after a windstorm. There two androids lay broken in half; beyond them

a fighter clad in reddish fur rotted. The rising sun glinted on a shattered spear in the hands of a Zarathzan, slid on to the blade of a sword buried in an android's skull.

He clambered, dripping, from the sea. Sorrowing, he walked among the bodies, recognizing many beside whom he had fought in the women's compound.

Something groaned, ahead of him. It was Morlon, hairy torso riddled with arrows, his black fur dyed red. Thor knelt and lifted his head to a knee.

"Aava came into the gatestone you gave Peter Gordon, Thor," muttered the dying man. "He saw where we went. We fled as swiftly as we could with the women, but Aava's androids crossed the Undying Sea in ships and caught us."

Thor's lips curled in anger. "Always Aava!"

"We fought a rear-guard fight, all the way. I fell here. I don't know what happened to the others. They went on—"

THE giant Morlon stiffened suddenly, muscles ridging over legs and arms. His eyes rolled backwards.

Thor put him down on the sandy shore, gently.

He went on, along the path made clear by fallen bodies, by dropped weapons. Here was havoc wrought on man and android by sharp steel, by the honed edge of war-arrows and spears. Thor saw that there lay more androids than men.

Toward evening he heard them. Hoarse warcries throbbed in the air. He crawled up over a lip of rock.

Before him lay the settlement, a low-walled city of kiosks and towers, their dun clay surfaces ornamented with ochre and vermilion. On its broad walls were archers and spearmen, patrolling during a lull in the battle. The low tents of the androids penned in the city, ringing it with pointed pennon-poles.

Thor gathered himself. He lifted his axe, swung it loosely to accustom his hand and arm to its feel. There was no way leading between those robot-tents, but Thor knew there was an invisible path leading to the settlement walls, a road he had to cleave with axe and feet.

He stood up, grim and gaunt against the bright sky.

Standing, he could see beyond the lip of rock, away to his right. Androids were tied to chains there, pulling. They were dragging great wagons filled with huge urns. Aava in the urn! He was coming, to blast the walls with his titanic power!

Thor stifled a sob of anger and leaped forward. He ran as runs the deer, barely touching the passing ground with his feet, but flying swiftly. His axe was steady in his hand.

This was his one chance, when they were bringing Aava to the city. The androids would be occupied with their master. They would not be prepared for anyone trying to get in the city.

If anyone noticed him, they paid him no heed. He was almost under the walls when three androids sprang from the shelter of a tent to meet him with naked swords.

Thor never stopped his rush. The axe lifted and swung, went back and swung up again. One android remained standing, coming in swiftly, throwing himself in a desperate lunge.

Thor sidestepped, pecked with the point of the axe right into the middle of the forehead. There was a sharp scream, and then the ponderous gates were opening before him. Thor dove through as spears whistled over his head.

Yorg grinned, slapping Thor on naked shoulder. "We thought you dead. Gordon and Kor Tan will be glad to see you."

"And Karola?"

Yorg laughed. "She pines, the yellow one. But come."

Along clay-brick streets they went, as Thor told of the urns they were bringing from the shore. He scowled and shook his white-furred head. "We cannot last when Aava sears holes in our walls. The androids will come, and then the Outlaws will be no more."

"If we had some wood on this accursed planet," growled Thor, "I might be able to rig a catapult."

He explained the function of the catapult to Yorg, who nodded, lips tightly drawn. In his eyes was the flicker of a new hope. "It might be. We gather what we can from the spacewrecks that the planet gathers. Other things we steal. We have some wood stored. And some cording. I will get to work at once."

Yorg led Thor to a great circular building with walls of glass, where sunlight fused across a tile floor, making the room alive with light. A girl with long yellow hair turned from a group at the end of the chamber. She screamed her delight.

"Thor! Peter, Slag, it's Thor!"

Their delight chased the worry from their eyes and faces for a few moments, as they shook his hand and pounded his shoulders. Peter Gordon said, "Jolly good to have you back, old man. But I'm afraid even having you here won't do any good. The androids have us surrounded. You say they are bringing Aava in the urns. Looks as though it's all over."

"Not yet," Thor growled, and told them of the Discoverer, and the astral voyage they had made.

Gordon wrinkled furrowed brows. "Can't see what good knowing that is, you know. It—"

"Think, man. I'm not too good at chemistry, but there are clues and hints all over this planet. Most of it is sand, rolling mile after mile. Even the red grasslands have sandy beds. And the rocks. There is almost as much rock as sand. What do you and the robots build your cities of? Clay! What jewels are embedded in the cave where Aava dwells? Opal, onyx, carnelian, jasper!

"Aava lives in a circle of pure quartz. Look!"

THOR put his hand in his pocket, drew out tiny green flecks of crystal, "I got this by scraping the urn where Aava appeared to his androids in the temple. It's glass! Something in Aava's nature was hardened by oxygen, and the sand in the substance of the urn turned into glass!

"When the Discoverer took me out into space and back in Time, when I saw the worlds of this space-realm created, one thing struck me. I watched Aava and his planet evolve from an empty void, saw the planet grow and take form.

"Gordon, I saw no fern forests, no great jungles of vegetation whose rotting and sinking into peat bogs gave us coal. Coal is carbon. And there were no petroleum wells, and petroleum is a compound of hydrocarbons."

Gordon rubbed his chin, frowning. "It's all jolly interesting, old man."

Thor waved a hand. "Can't you see? It all argues just one thing. No coal, no oil. No forms of carbon at all. Just quartz, sand, onyx, jasper, clay, carnelian, opal, rock—all forms of silicon.

"Aava is silicate life, where we are carbon life!"

The Englishman whistled low.

Thor went on, "Silicon is almost as ingenious as carbon. Both have a valence of six. Both unite with other substances to form various compounds. But, just as life with carbon structure cannot stand its own refuse—the carbon dioxide that we exhale when we breathe, so life with a silicate base cannot stand its own refuse—silicon dioxide—or sand!"

"Afraid I'm rather stupid, old man. Not following you very well."

"Human beings exhale carbon dioxide when they breathe, after taking the oxygen into their lungs to help release their energy. But if they breathed only that refuse, or carbon dioxide, they would soon die. The same with a being formed of silicon, such as Aava is. He forms sand—silicon dioxide—as his debris when he removes the oxygen from the air that is necessary to his life. Suppose we fed only sand to Aava?"

"You mean it would smother him?"

"You're thinking of human death. This is different. Why must all death be a matter of limp, lifeless clay? Why couldn't silicon beings die and become—"

"Of course. Sand and the heat generated by Aava's flame, plus the high silicate content in the flame itself—*glass!*"

"And glass is a form of death."

Gordon stared at him with wide blue eyes. "Man, man. You've solved it. But how can we get that sand onto Aava without getting killed ourselves? Even supposing we can get out of this trap?"

"You'll have to create a diversion. An attack on the urns. At night, I'll slip out and get to the Undying Sea. I'll swim underwater. I'll need a length of clay pipe to breathe through. And before I go, I want to make one more trip to the Mountains of Distortion. I remember there was a lot of sand over the cave of Aava. I want to check that. If true, one man might kill him. I'm going to try, anyhow."

Thor walked around the room, eyes gleaming brightly. He said, "Peter, we have a world here that we can make our own.

We're locked inside a bubble of space, a cancerous growth that keeps this universe and our old universe apart. We are free to make whatever kind of place we want, in here. It's up to us to do it. We can't fail."

Outside the walls, they heard the deep-throated roar of the androids as the urns rolled forward. Gordon said simply, "If you succeed, it will have to be soon. Or there will be none left to profit by it!"

IV

SUNLIGHT GLINTED ON THE flat surface of the Undying Sea. Near its sandy shore, an almost naked man clambered wet and dripping from its waters. In his right hand he carried a giant axe. In his left was a length of clay tubing. He paused and tossed the tube into the water, watched the ripples spread as it hit and sank.

Thor Masterson turned his face toward the black hulk of mountain far to the west. Around his loins was wrapped a cloth fitted with strips of toughened leather. Soft skin sandals protected his feet from the bite and burn of hot sands and rocks.

He ran smoothly, easily as the American Indian, at a lope that decimated distance. When sweat beaded his body, he found a pool and lay in its cool waters until fit to go on. Hammering away at him was the remembrance of the Outlaw settlement, of the androids storming the walls, of the urns rolling forward and tilting. Once in a while a stone from Yorg's crude catapults would overturn an urn, but the hits would be scarce.

While the attack went on, he lay on a smooth table and disassociated his astral self from his body. In spirit form he roamed the planet, seeking Aava. Deep in the bowels of the black mountain he had finally found him.

Thor dared not reveal his presence, or Aava would have lashed out with that titanic power that was destructive even to his projected self. Instead, he went down from the thin crust of rock over Aava, sinking through the golden granules of what had once been a great desert, to the fine crust of jewel-embedded rock that was the roof of Aava's cave.

Between jewels, hovering in rock and

sand, Thor had looked down on the Green Flame.

Aava was verdant brilliance in the red quartz oval, his inner fires moving fluidly, pulsing, beating. He seemed to slumber, thoughts far away. Thor knew where his thoughts were: at the Outlaw settlement.

Thor looked around him, studying the thin crust of rock, the jewels, the overhanging sands. Beneath the rock crust was a lip of stone bridge, five feet down from the rock roof. Thor had grinned, and slid back up through the sand and stone.

The rock cut into his feet as he climbed. Up sheer cliffsides, using fingers to clutch at stone projections, digging holes with his toes where no holds ought to be dug, hugging stone with his chest and belly, he went. By inch and by foot he climbed.

Night came while he stood on a yard-wide natural path. Thor grunted, eyeing it. Sleep was what he wanted, sleep was what his tired muscles craved. But he went on.

Into the darkness, where a misstep would send him plummeting to jagged rocks thousands of feet below, Thor crept. He crawled, vertically.

Above him he could see green light, faint tendrils of it.

That was the crevice, the entrance to the Cave of Aava.

AND at the Outlaw settlement, Peter Gordon whistled arrows at the heads of the androids surging through the break in the walls that had just been blasted by the urns. But arrows and spears could not stay such as the androids. With sword and axe they hewed their path above the bleeding, dying corpses of the outlaws.

Karola shuddered beside him, handing him arrows. "Will Thor find Aava? Will he be in time to help us?"

"Jove, I hope so. But it looks bad, Karola. Very bad."

The girl grimaced, and closed white fingers on the hilt of a slim dagger. "They'll never take me back. Never!"

"Got the boulder!... No, I know. Aava hopes to breed a race of living beings with artificial insemination. But he needs women for that, and so far we've kept him from them—"

Below the balcony where they stood, they saw Slag and Yorg lead a charge with club and sword. The red dwarf howled his oaths

as he slammed and battered at android skulls. Yorg, grunting and panting, used his blade like a scalpel.

"They're holding, Karola. The jolly blighters are driving them back."

"No, no. There—another blast by Aava in the urn. Another group!"

The fresh androids drove into Slag and Yorg's flank, wedged in the screaming fighters, threw them back on themselves. A hairy red arm wielded a club like a blackjack. A white-furred arm cut and stabbed with a sword. But the androids came forward. They rolled over the outlaws.

Gordon said sadly, "We'd best fall back, Karola. We can't hold them any longer."

HERE in the cave opening, Thor stood up and moved his axe, testing its heft. Green light danced and flared on the broad blades. Thor grinned wolfishly, and went forward.

Stepping carefully, using the shadows of the stalagmites to hide his giant frame, Thor went deeper into the cave, closer to the green flame that flared in the bowels of the mountain. It was warm here, for Aava was a thing of fire.

On the skin sandals that gave no sound, he stepped forward. He walked in the myriad light that the flame plucked from the gems and spread throughout his cave.

He could see the bridge of rock that lifted its stone arc high to the towering, shadowy roof of the cave. Up there, in the black shadows, he could stand on that bridge and be close to the roof—close enough to swing an axe.

Thor sped silently across the empty space between tumbled rock slabs. He leaped for the bridge and ran up its curving back.

SLAG and Yorg bled from a score of wounds as they fought their fight by the settlement gate with club and sword. Side by side, two against an army, they dug bleeding feet into stone streets, and fought like madmen.

They piled androids in front and to the sides. They made a funereal mountain of wrecked, synthetic bodies.

Slag and Yorg would die here.

They knew it, yet they fought on. The others needed time to get to the circular

tower, to fight their last stand against Aava. So the club and the sword stayed swinging, and the pile grew higher.

Now they could hear the trundling of the urn-wagons.

Yorg panted, "They come nearer, Slag."

"It will not be long. You are good fighter, Yorg."

The androids fell away. An urn was coming up. Behind it, androids massed with spears and swords, ready to attack when these madmen were wiped from their path.

Yorg rested on his blade and grinned at Slag. "Thor would attack that urn and tip it. Then the androids would get the force of it. It would kill a lot, facing that army."

Slag grunted and gripped his club.

The urn began to tilt toward the two bloody fighters. Yorg growled in his throat, and the red dwarf and the white ape leaped forward.

They struck the urn with their feet, at its apex. The clay vase shuddered and swung back. A green light reared up, blazing fury and annihilation.

Slag and York fell forward, over the lip of the urn as it dropped toward the androids.

A beam of green blight swept outward, over the massed androids. As a breath blows out the candleflame, so the green fire blew away the androids.

But Slag and York had fallen into that flame, unable to halt their forward impetus. The green flame touched them first, and destroyed them. They were dwarf and ape one moment, nothingness the next.

Watching from a slit in the tower wall, Karola rubbed tears from her wet cheeks with the back of her hand.

FAR beneath him, the floor of the cave was dark and broken. There on the stone bridge, with the jewel-embossed roof so near, Thor was in a different world.

He stood now on the tip of the bridge's arc. The thin crust of roof was within reach of his axe. Thor looked down, full into the red quartz oval where green Aava slumbered, moving and radiating always.

"He's at the settlement. He's blasting away at something," Thor whispered.

He swung the axe in circles. He stood on tiptoes and the muscles of his naked

back and thickly thewed arms bunched and bulged. With a sob of fury, Thor drove his axe at the crust of roof.

Sparks glinted. A flake of quartz fell away, dropped to the floor below and bounded. Echoes sprang up, dancing the length of the cave.

Thor attacked the roof with insane fury.

Flakes and chips of roof showered below, all along the cave-floor. Thor sobbed with the strain of his eerie battle. His lungs heaved. His arm rose and fell, rose and fell. Sparks grew to myriad thousands as the keen edge of the war-axe bit and dug in the stone.

Over the clatter and clang of steel and stone, rose an ominous thunder. Aava was being awakened from his slumbers. The green of the cave grew brighter, more freshly verdant. The red of the carnelians became purple; the purple of the amethysts, black.

Thor slashed and cut unceasingly.

Like a volcano gathering itself to spew its lava, Aava rumbled. With fire and with fury, he quested for the source of the falling rock.

A tongue of flame leaped up to stand for one long instant beside Thor. He grimaced and drove his axe without stay. The keen biting edges would not last long, now. They were almost done. A streak down the flat side of one axe-blade told him it would give, soon.

And the roof showed no sign of cracking!

THE MEN AND WOMEN in the tower watched the circle of urns gathering around them, tilting upwards. Hugging the walls and shadows of the buildings, the androids watched.

Arrows thudded down onto the androids attending the urns. But when two fell, four leaped from the darkness to take their places.

High in the tower, Peter Gordon fed his arrows to the attackers. The string of his bow was warm. His fingers were blistered, raw with continual friction. But his lips were tight, and his pale blue eyes were icy.

Karola bit her full red lower lip, shaking her long yellow hair from her eyes and wiping those same eyes surreptitiously with the palm when they grew moist.

The urns were facing the tower at last. Gordon dropped his bow, put out a hand, burying his fingers in the smooth flesh of Karola's nude shoulder.

"All over, all over. Jolly good fight while it lasted."

"Thor, Thor," Karola whimpered.

In another instant, the urns would thunder out their destructive fury. But the moment lingered into minutes, and still the urns were silent.

A wondering babble broke from the throats of the androids. Some of them bent and stared within the urns, where tiny green flames flickered. Those green flames should have annihilated the last of the outlaw settlement. Yet they did not.

Karola looked at Peter Gordon.

"Do you think—Thor—?"

AAVA knew he was on the rock bridge now. Thor knew that Aava knew, and still he dug and battered his axe upward. He had a depression sculpted from the roof. A few more blows and—

The axe dug in. Thor pulled it loose.

He heard Aava, then. A blast of titantic heat, of power unimaginable, came roaring up at him.

Thor leaped outward, away from the bridge.

For a moment he hung a hundred feet above the jagged floor of the cave. In that instant, Aava hurled himself upward, filling the cave with radiance and intolerable heat.

Thor threw wide his arms, closed them on a stalactite dropping its thin rock formation from the roof. His legs spraddled the drooping stone, hugging it.

Aava raged, biting and burning at the stone bridge, seeking his quarry. Sullenly, he dropped back within the quartz oval.

Thor almost missed the bridge, leaping back for it. His hands scrabbled at the loose shale, sliding and slipping, before his fingers tightened on a rough projection.

With insane might, he flung himself and his axe again at the depression. Before Aava gathered himself once more, he had to do it.

The axe dug in. When he pulled it loose, a few flecks of sand slid with it. The thin grains showered downward, running in a steady stream.

"Earthling, stop! The sand must not come down on me. Stop and—"

The voice of Aava rose to a shrill crescendo, battering at his ears. But Thor worked on. His axe arm lifted. The crack widened. Tons of sand hung above that thin roof, on delicate balances. By opening the roof even so slightly as he had done, he was destroying that balance. An incredible weight of sand was waiting, waiting—

Aava rose in all his might and splendour, to seal the crack.

And the sand fell.

Thor reeled back, battered by thundering deserts.

He hung on what was left of the rock bridge, staring. Upreared in green iridescence, showered by falling tons of sand that formed a tan curtain around him, Aava writhed. His great bulk was twisted into strange convolutions, distorted grotesqueries of liquid movement. A great spray of fire lapped out and upward to seal the gap through which the sand streamed downward. It rose against the falling tons, and was pressed back and down.

Thor huddled in the darkness, cold and numb. He was watching the death of a god, a god that he had killed.

The sand showered down, lapping and laving at the monstrous green tentacle that was Aava as he died.

THE androids stared deep within the bowl of the urns. The green filament was out, dead. They glanced in fright at the stone tower and stared at one another.

"Aava is dead! The Lord Aava is no more!"

Peter Gordon notched an arrow to his bowstring, sent it whizzing down and into the braincase of a robot. The flying arrow was like a signal. Spears and arrows darkened the sky. The androids fell in scores.

For a moment the androids stood undecided. And then, with a yell that sent shivers up the backs of the Outlaws, so vibrant was its grief, they turned and sped from the city, out across the plains, scattering.

"We will hunt them down," smiled Gordon. "There is nothing to fear, now. It is all a matter of time.

"Karola! Karola! The settlement has triumphed!"

She brushed back thick yellow hair from wet violet eyes. She turned and stumbled to the door. Catching herself Karola laughed over her shoulder, "I'm going to Thor. I want to find Thor."

"Good idea. Jolly good idea, at that. We'll all go. In the boats at the Undying Sea. I haven't sailed a boat in years. Say, Thor will need a fleet for his new world, won't he? I think I'd fit perfectly as admiral. Admiral Peter Gordon. Doesn't sound bad at all, does it?"

Gordon discovered he would have to save his breath, to keep up with Karola's long white legs. He grinned and loped on.

THOR came up from his crouch, coughing in the dusty, sand-clogged air. Aava was one solid pillar of farflung glass, etched and sculpted by his own death-agonies into something that looked like windblown moss.

The sand had clogged at the opening in the roof. In one last, despairing lunge, Aava had sealed his nemesis. But it was too late to save him. His very being sucked in all those granules, whipped them around in the fiery core of him and fused them with the silicon and sodium in his body. For one instant, Aava had become a mad factory.

Thor came forward, put out a palm and placed it against the smooth surface of the tall glass column. The glass was still warm. The bits of ferrous silicate that had given Aava his distinctive coloring were imparting that same warm green to the dead image.

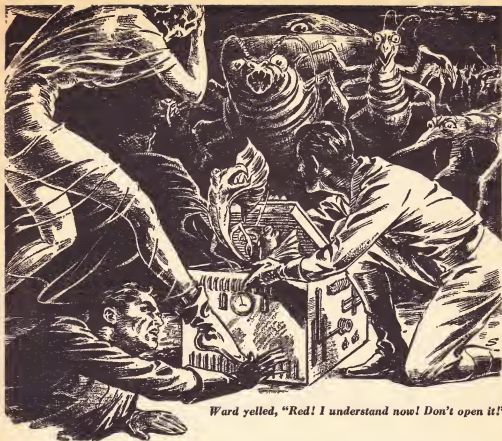
"As though a sculptor had carved him," whispered Thor.

Outside the cave entrance, the sun was shining and a fresh wind was whipping the mountainside.

Seeing the ships crossing the Undying Sea, noting the shaken swords and lances, Thor grew hot with emotion.

A girl with yellow hair dived into the water, climbed dripping onto shore, and set out for him. After her streamed the others, all with new hope, new life in their breasts.

Thor grinned. He ran to meet Karola, arms hungry for her.



Ward yelled, "Red! I understand now! Don't open it!"

MO - SANSHON !

By Bryce Walton

Only Professor Ward knew they were on Earth, could almost hear them rustling behind their humanoid faces. Then Red came to help him, and of course he had to trust Red. But—could he?

HIS GAUNT FIGURE slumped wearily in the only chair in the otherwise bare cube, while the telaudio pronounced its immutable sentence.

The world psychometric council finds you, Doctor Jonathan Ward, a paranoid with advanced delusions of persecution and of grandeur. Your belief in a super-insect menace threatening humanoid culture we find unsupported by logical evidence. You will be subjected to the reconditioning and readjustment clinics as authorized in Title C, Section 890, Article 72, Paragraph 18,

Lines 72-86, Revised Solar Statutes, 2166. Section C-890-72, Article 18-1-W, Solar Statutory Psychometry.

As the dry and precise voice faded from the six-by-six screen, long suppressed panic hit Ward like a sudden sickness. He ran to the smooth panel of the door.

An irrational reflex! Both door and single exit window could be activated only from the outside. He was two hundred floors up, isolated in a Verdict Cube in Washington's Federal Building. Administrative Guards would be here soon to take him away. And when they released him

from the clinics he wouldn't be John Ward any more. He would be someone else; it wouldn't matter who, because by then the Mo-Sanshon would have accomplished their purpose. The solar humanoid culture would have become only a passing incident in geological history together with the giant ferns, the saurians, and now—*super insects!* God, no wonder they labeled him psycho! No one believed. It was too ridiculous. It had been trite thematic material for emotionalizing fiction for so long—

But the Martian subterranean ant-like culture, the Mo-Sanshon, were directly responsible for 'his failure! Somehow, he didn't know even tentatively, they had infiltrated. They either controlled humanoids in high, influential positions by telepathy, or could, in some ingenious physiogenic way, assume human form. He knew that Vassco and Greever on the Psychometric Council had been prejudiced by some influence other than reason.

He ran to the translucent window. He pummeled his aching brain, while the polychromatic light harmonics corrugated ironically through the transparent plastic walls. His fevered eyes looked out on a black sea of velvet night and millions of splotches of cold phosphorescence. Dark airtaxis glided past on traffic beams—glided unknowingly past the imprisoned entomologist who alone out of the billions on Earth and Mars had probed the fantastic, aged secrets of the Mo-Sanshon.

He pressed his temples desperately, felt the pounding of his heart. If he'd only been able to get physical evidence of their infiltration. If they could duplicate human form, then why hadn't any of them been captured, or have left some trace of their alien derivation?

He sagged against the wall as the photo-electric banks of the door functioned oillily, the rippling light harmonies dying to a monotone grey. Three uniformed Guards stood a moment, looking at Ward curiously while the panel closed. They were precise and mechanistic. The larger one, with an abnormally red face, said in a level, toneless voice, "Well, Doctor Ward. Are you ready?"

His vision blurred with tears as he stumbled toward them. When he stepped outside that door everything that signified Jona-

than Ward would be altered. He would become a new, reconditioned personality, remembering nothing of the past he knew now, because it would no longer exist. Everything he had experienced that created the complex cause and effect mechanism of his mind would be eliminated from his psychogenes. And, like billions of other naive minions of the Solar Federation, he would be completely bewildered, surprised, horrified and subsequently annihilated or enslaved by the Mo-Sanshon.

They had stepped to either side of him. But the sound of photo-electric banks came again—from behind them—from the window. The sound was followed by a sharp, nasal voice.

"Get back against the wall, Gestapo! Unless you want to play tag with a needle-gun."

WARD'S stunned brain turned him around warily, slowly. He stared and blinked. He saw one of the Guard's hands dive for his service paralysis ray gun. There was a sharp *thunggg* from the little wiry man crouched by the open window, and an air needle punctured the Guard's chest. He cried out feebly as he fell unmoving at Ward's feet.

The remaining two froze in incredulous fear. The red-faced one seemed abnormally affected; his eyes bulged, face twitched. The little man, clothed in the natty pale blue garb of an airtaxi driver, motioned with his gun. Small black eyes with rusty flecks glittered dangerously.

"You, Doc!" he clipped. "Get out the window. These puppets are liable to go hysterical any minute."

Hope spurted inside Ward, ran through his brain like a rat in a garret, as he fell away from the Guards and found himself before the open window. An airtaxi was parked there, held by the grapple rail.

The Guards were strongly conditioned, so strongly that the possibility of Ward escaping overcame their blue funk. Desperately they sprang in a half-hearted attack, whipping out their guns.

"Chicken-gutted jackasses!" spat the taxidriver, firing again and plunging the first Guard moaning on his face. The big, red-skinned Guard slewed to one side; as he fell to escape the taxidriver's aim, he pressed the stud of his paralysis ray. The

taxidriver fell clear by a hair's breadth beneath the stream of blue fire. Another needle twanged.

What happened then would have appalled the most sanguine and capacious imagination. Ward's brain crawled; his stomach dropped with nausea and horror. The room swirled like madness unveiling herself as the dying Guard's mouth opened and a tattered scream pierced the confined space. And then the Guard's body began to disintegrate.

Some chemical reaction process, working at astounding, chain-reaction speed, reduced the whole body and uniform, within a few seconds, to a small liquid puddle which vaporized leaving no sign that such a Guard had ever existed, except the paralysis gun and a few bits of alloy.

The taxidriver said casually. "The Mo-Sanshon, Doc."

Ward gulped. "The Mo—"

"That's the reason they're never found out, Doc. Suicidals. When they suspect there's even a dim possibility of discovery, they release a catalyst into their blood stream. That's what happens."

"But surely," choked Ward, "someone has seen—"

"What? They can never prove they've seen what doesn't exist any more. Psycho cells have always been loaded with patients who claimed to see what wasn't there. Come on, let's dust out of this hole!"

Peculiarly ancient jargon, though Ward, even for a taxidriver. He stepped onto the narrow ramp. A cold night wind cooled his fever and new hope strengthened him.

"Who the devil are you?" he said faintly, as the taxidriver closed the window to the Verdict Cube and dropped down beside him in the front seat of the open air tourist taxi.

He grinned thinly, recklessly. "Another psycho the Council hasn't labeled yet. Name's Red. Red Formica. To be pedantic, you might call me a victim of regression, an atavist. Things have got to have a tag, you know." He released the magnetic grapplers, and punched the controls. The air-taxi darted out into a traffic beam, and lunged downward.

Before Ward could formulate further questions the taxi dropped heavily down on a dark, small rooflanding on the lowest, cheapest level of the city. He allowed him-

self to be led down a shabby, creaking escalator and through a narrow corridor into an ill-lighted room, thick with the reeking heavy drug of the Venusian bluerose. The occasional gurgle of mind-burning *selir*-whiskey and the dull monody of a three-piece Ionian orchestra completed the morbid setting.

A forbidden underground escapeasy!

Here, men of the lower income brackets, who couldn't afford the far-flung exotic worlds of the System, came to escape their monotonous, colorless lot.

Ward gaped. Back in his small, provincial midwest college laboratory he had never, of course, expected to end up in an escapeasy. Dim, lethargic shadows stirred in the drugged gloom and from somewhere a girl's soft laughter called. The scrofulous dive was permeated with a heavy air of solemn, self-induced asphyxiation.

RED led Ward to a table, and they became a part of the vaporuous shadows. "Two glasses of *satho*," said Red familiarly. A vague form, apparently the barkeep, glided away and returned almost immediately with the cold, stealthy liquor.

"A toast, Doc," said Red tightly. "To a quick victory over the Mo-Sanshon—all ten trillion or so of them."

Ward nodded numbly, and wondered how his thirty-eight years of academic research could have qualified him for this. He had sweated out a hermit's life on the burning Martian Deserts for four years, gathering his data on the Mo-Sanshon who filled the countless miles of catacombs under the red clay surface, and he had considered that an all time low—at the time.

He drank. The liquor scorched his throat and started quickly on his brain. He belched and wiped tears from his eyes. Finally he managed to whisper, "I'd appreciate a sort of hint as to what this is all about."

Red's freckled nose wrinkled. "I have a good story. Very credible. I just want to help you. Not because I give a damn about whether humanity stays around or not. But because I crave excitement. If you need a reason, that's as good as any." He drained his glass stoically and called for a refill.

"Real tiger-milk," he grinned. His red hair flamed as a dancing girl slid by with

a hokohloo lamp spinning its sense-drunkening harmonies in a jeweled hand.

"But how do you know so much about all this?" insisted Ward.

"We cabbies get around." Which didn't explain much. Or did it?

"But why should you believe me, when no one else does?"

"I just want to, Doc, that's all. I think the old anarchistic culture was better than this puking state of the proletariat we've got now. Got most of my education from the past—nineteenth and early twentieth century literature. And I live in the underground ghettos of the present. Wishful thinking. I only hope you're right, probably."

"I assure you," pleaded Ward. "I'm not a psycho."

"I don't give a damn whether you're psycho or not. So am I. Anyway, we're killers now, gangsters. Unheard of in our perfect little futile order. So unheard of that we'll probably get away with it easier than we think."

Ward shrugged. "I've got some equipment that must get to Mars very quickly, if my fight against the Mo-Sanshon is to be effective. Speed is essential."

"Want to get them in the heart," said Red.

"Why . . . er . . . yes. Their headquarters, their center of operation. In fact, to get the Queen Mother alone should be sufficient. The real intelligence, I believe, is only a small inner circle of mutations."

Red leaned over the table. His rust colored eyes shown eagerly. "Then let's go, Doc!"

Ward's lips curled. "There wasn't a chance before, let alone now."

"I've got it all fixed, Doc," said Red. "What do you think I brought you here for?"

"I've been wondering," said Ward dryly.

"We antisocials stick together here. Kind of an underground cult, you know. And we figured it all out how we could rescue you and get you to Mars—just as a gag you know, a little excitement. That act in the Federal Building was just like an old two-dimensional movie I saw the other night at the museum. Late twentieth century I think, called, 'Hounds of the Void.' Got the book, too."

"But how do we get to Mars?" insisted Ward desperately. "Was that in the movie, too?"

"Precisely," said Red. He motioned, and Ward was stumbling and mumbling away after the red-headed taxidriver.

IN THE dim narrow sleeping cube, lit by a single ancient acho-lyte bulb, two men lay breathing feebly on the littered floor. "They'll be out for at least forty-eight hours," bragged Red. "I gave 'em both triple shots of parasthetic."

"So wha—" began Ward; then, as he looked closer, he cried, "Good Lord! It's Professor Limerick!"

Red laughed in a thin, mirthless way that sent a little tremor up Ward's spine. "That's right, Doc. Professor Limerick and his laboratory assistant. Educated morons who skip blithely down the perpetually dim halls of learning. They're scheduled to leave on the *Sol*, blasting for Marsport at 2400. You know what for?"

"No," whispered Ward faintly. "What for?"

"To study the indigenous spores of the canal peculiar to the eastern polar banks of—and I don't know what else, Fiddlers while Rome burns. Who gives a damn about indigenous spores when the Mo-Sanshon is—?"

"You seem rather vehement, Red, for a person who only pretends to believe in the Mo-Sanshon, just for a thrill."

Red relaxed, his obvious manic nervous system soothed slightly by the paraette smoke he inhaled in great drags. "Anyway, Doc, there's our passports and number one priorities to Mars. We've got two hours to get your equipment aboard. It's here in the city, ain't it?"

Ward nodded. "In a locked vault. But I didn't think anyone else knew about it but myself. If the Mo-Sanshon had—"

Red interrupted, "Wait here a minute, Doc," and disappeared into the reeking alleyway. He was back almost at once with a quick-moving, sprightly little man with a pink face and long white hair. He carried a plastic oblong box in one hand.

"This is Alsar Alingmore," said Red. "People's Artist of the Inner-Planet Folk Theatre Circuits. A philosopher. We sometimes talk of the good old days as they are referred to by malcontents. This is pro-

fessor Jonathan Ward, saviour of the Solar System. Maybe."

Alingmore bowed low. "Very fortunate to meet you, Doctor."

ALINGMORE sat the black case on a table and reverently opened it. A make-up kit, complete with plastimold, syntheskin and all the accessories of modern theatre. "He's a wizard at make-up," bragged Red. "He passed himself off as a Venusian fishman once, at a Federation Council meeting. Got his artist's license taken away from him. Now he haunts escapees. He's going to make us look like the scholastic idiots on the floor. We'll use their priorities and passports, and we'll be on Mars with the *Sol*. What do you think of 'Hounds of the Void' now?"

"I can't think very clearly," murmured Ward, sitting down heavily on the pneumatic couch. "Maybe it was the *satho* . . ."

In a matter of moments Ward found himself aboard the *Sol*, ensconced in a special stateroom with quartzite observation dome. He was looking at a face in the three-dim reflector that resembled Professor Limerick more than Professor Limerick himself. "I don't believe it," he said to the taxidriver who now could have passed for the assistant's zygote twin.

"Sure, we made it. Knew we would, Doc." He was sprawled out on the richly furnished gravnod bed, reading a ragged museum copy of the "Hounds of the Void." "These Guards and officials don't know how to deal with antisocials. Not enough cases in our tired order to keep them in practice. A few old time gangsters and criminals could take over the whole System in a jiffy. These representatives of Solar law and order are phonies."

Ward turned. "But the Mo-Sanshon aren't so naive, Red. They know I'm aboard. My disguise probably doesn't fool them. They know I've got the cage of mercenaries with me, too." Ward looked at the plasticage on the floor among many other cases. It contained numerous air valves and was about a yard square. It was very heavy for its size but was easily carried because of the levitation plate on the bottom. From inside of it came a steady rustling and stirring.

Ward nodded. "The Mo-Sanshon will keep on trying every means they can with-

in apparently legitimate channels to stop me before I can release those mercenaries inside their subterranean chasms. And that won't be easy for us, either. I was there four years and couldn't get anywhere near their headquarters. They've been there for centuries, aeons, before humanoid culture evolved on either world."

"I know," said Red. "How different and lonely their life must be—when you even compare it with ours. How envious and jealous they must be. And how they must hate us, buried as they are underground, hidden from the stars. Static, no individuality—that's all lost in the colony. The State is all. And someday humanity may evolve into the same death trap. No wonder they want to destroy us. They can't stand to see us keep on living, even partially free. It hurts."

Ward nodded, surprised again at Red's heterogeneous knowledge. "But, even assuming anthropomorphic attributes as they have somehow been able to do, they still are insects, with instinct rather than intelligence as we know it. They see the world, universe, their own culture with the same prejudice, egotism, and dogma. I doubt if they can even comprehend the physical facts of space, duration and distance, as we know it."

"Therefore, they shouldn't survive," said Red with sudden savage coldness. "They can't know this life, Doc, and they shouldn't live. And neither should little guys like us if we can't reach the stars. Here I am, born in an age of atomics and interplanetary travel—and I'm bored. I have to read science-fantasy from the escape literature of past centuries to keep from going psycho. Do ordinary proletarians like me get to go to Mars and Venus, or even Luna? Hell no! Have to have number one priority and who gets them? Big shots with plenty of suction, and platinum credits. Only a fraction of a percent of Earthmen have ever been outside the ionosphere. Wait'll the revolution, Doc. There'll be a spaceship on every roof landing, and two pressure suits in every closet!"

"Won't have to worry if the Mo-Sanshon takes over," said Ward as he spread some hair eradicator over his face and wiped it off with a towel. "Annihilation is a sure cure for ennui."

"And preferable," said Red softly. "I ought to know."

"Almost blastoff time," said Ward. "Let's strap in."

Red went to the door and adjusted the photo cell. "That'll have to be turned back before it'll function. Don't open it unless you know who wants it—if it's an officer, it won't make any difference. Be alert, Doc. There are Mo-Sanshon on this ship!"

"Are you certain?" said Ward quickly. "How can you be?"

"I am," said Red tensely, his lips a thin harsh line. "Very certain, Doc."

WARD breathed easier after he awoke from the effects of the sedative and found that they had at least gotten outside Earth's gravity without mishap. Only the Mo-Sanshon to worry about now. That was all, just the potential conquerors of the Solar System. Through the special observation dome into a mind-drowning eternity of devouring blackness, Ward gazed in awe. An expanse dotted with an eternity of coldly-cut, unshimmering dots of light. He wasn't new to spaceflight, but the spectacle was inexhaustible, a bottomless cup of frigid infinity.

But Red appeared mesmerized. His face stuck to the quartz, he murmured dreamily, "The void . . . deadly emptiness and waste . . . an uncharted sea without boundaries . . . when a guy's out here, he's a part of space and time . . . God, how I've wanted it . . . and I never thought I could have it . . . my world's a long way from any of this . . ." He turned slowly.

"Doc—I'd like to keep right on going, if I could. I'd go right on out beyond the Asteroids, and keep on until Jupiter faded. I'd go on out on the other side of the Life Zone until Uranus was lost. And then—well—what would be better than just to disappear in interstellar space?"

Ward swallowed a protein-vito concentrate and said he could think of a few things that might be more pleasant at the moment.

"This civilization's bad enough," said Red. "But the Mo-Sanshon is worse. It's lifeless, evil and futile."

"Right," said Ward. "But I've often wondered why they haven't conquered man before. They have the advantage of reproduction and adaptability. The Earth fly and

the Martian *trunj* can reproduce over twelve trillion in six months. Their adaptability is vastly superior. They've been around for a billion years or more on Earth and on Mars probably longer. And their number of species is overwhelming—somewhere close to a million on Earth, on Mars somewhat less. Their only trouble has been their static culture. Permanence. But now—"

"Bugs can have their mutations, too," finished Red.

Ward said, "That was my starting premise. That mutant intelligence has appeared among the Mo-Sanshon and that their leadership has spread to Earth and has influenced certain species of insects there—mainly ants, termites, and bees. On both worlds, they're now winning the battle of production. They'll be able to starve man out by taking his plants away from him and undermine his cities, which they're already doing at an alarming rate. Weakened by starvation, humanoids will be subject to disease, plague and pestilence, also brought by insects. This will be their *coup de grace*."

"And yet, Doc, you've got a way in that cage there to stop them!" Red's eyes were narrow lines behind dribbling paraette smoke.

"Right," said Ward. "And these mercenaries are certain antidotes—if we can just turn them loose among the Mo-Sanshon leaders."

"An insect menace," said Red. "Back in the age I prefer, they even stopped publishing fantasy themes about insects—overworked and too trite. And now to be a hero of an insect menace theme—"

"Was that the reason they stopped publishing that kind of stories," said Ward, "because it was overdone, trite? Maybe the editors were influenced by the Mo-Sanshon, even then. Charles Fort, you've read him? The excluded and the damned are marching."

"Fort and Korzybski, my bibles, Doc. And that's a good theory. The insects have been the most obvious threat to man's dominant position, yet they were ignored, the whole idea dropped when too much publicity was current."

Red looked at the cage. "Mercenaries," he said. "Ingenuous as hell. You're a great brain, Doc."

Ward studied the enigma that was labeled Red. There was no reason not to trust him now. He almost had to. "Yes. I've managed to breed a—"

The room's lights glowed blue and then died. Ward turned, mouth suddenly dry and sticky. Someone was outside their door. Red's face was twisted, his real expression showing through the plastmold and syntheskin makeup. It was one of burning hate. He leaped into the middle of the room in a half crouch. "It's one of them!" he hissed between tight teeth. "It's the Mo-Sanshon."

Ward said, "How can you tell?"

"No time for dialectics," said Red, voice trembling with emotion. "It's the Executive Officer of the *Sol*, no less. And you can't keep an Officer out. His keys'll open the banks, anyway."

Ward was getting callous. "Needle him, then. And he'll disappear. They can't blame us for a non-existent corpse."

"No!" grated Red. "There are others aboard. He has others waiting in the hall. I've got to stay hidden, understand that, Doc. That's the only way I can help you, and without that help, you'll never accomplish anything. You've got to trust me. I'll get the cage out of here and hide it."

"But—" began Ward.

"I'll hide here among these crates. You let 'em in. We'll see what happens."

This time the banks functioned, and Red ducked down out of sight. The panel slid slowly into the wall. The Officer standing framed in the opening was grossly huge, with a pasty dead white face and expressionless glassy eyes. His voice was low and hollow. He stepped inside and the door slid closed. Ward felt a smothering trapped cloud enveloping him, greater than any he had known so far, thick like poison air. Even the Executive Officer of a luxurious space liner like the *Sol*! The inhumanity of the creature was obvious to Ward, but he could understand why it wouldn't be to those uninformed. A little insight made all the difference. Why hadn't Red needed him as he stood here? The cage, of course, but then—besides no one would suspect a passenger listed as Professor Limerick, harmless botanist and—

"You will come with me, Professor Ward." It wasn't a question.

"You must have the wrong compart-

ment. I'm Professor Limerick. I'm going to study the indigenous spores along the canal at—"

"Doctor Ward, please," the phlegmatic voice said. "You've suspected we are telepathic. Now you know. It is a superior weapon. We know you killed one of us in Washington, and that you registered as Professor Limerick and his assistant—" the cumbersome head swayed. "By the way, where is he?"

"In the gaming rooms," said Ward quickly. "He . . . er . . . plays chess."

"You will come with me now," repeated the monotonous voice. The body shifted slightly.

"Will I?" said Ward. "You have no such right. As a passenger of—"

"You are a labeled psycho. I have full authority to confine you in a psychocell until we reach Mars. There is no other way. Our other methods have failed. For a human male, you have rather a finely developed mind. You will die enroute of—natural causes. A ship can never be held responsible for what happens to a psycho's unpredictable nervous system in space."

Ward's eyes circled the room. Red! For God's sake, Red! The cage of mercenaries rustled. The Mo-Sanshon retreated instinctively, then suddenly, with amazing agility, jumped between Ward and the cage. "It is too late," it said. "We shall take care of the cage for you. We shall release it in space." He reached for Ward.

He would have fought, but he knew there were others waiting outside. Red had said so, and he believed Red. The important thing was to clear this room long enough for Red to take the cage out and conceal it somewhere on the great liner.

"I'll come," he said. It eased his badly depressed ego to admit the obvious.

BLACKNESS and indescribable pain indefinitely prolonged, intermingled with a kind of eternity in the stygian night of the psychocell. There was no time in the blackness, so that forever and now, all concepts of time, merged into only pain. The Mo-Sanshon were killing him with sound.

There would be no evidence. The pain impinged with hideous slowness, played over his nerves like liquid flame. It coursed through his veins, his spine, until he shook

and twitched with agony for which there is no speech interpretation. It exploded again and again in his mind, and grew steadily into a monstrous continuous hell.

He was aware of periods of screaming and slobbering. He remembered indefinite episodes in which he was on his feet, hopping and jerking katatonically like a mad electric marionette. Every nerve cell jiggled; each separate nerve was erratic anguish.

Sometime later, still in the timeless blackness, he was stiffly outstretched on his face, his lips murmuring in a salty-tasting pool, either blood, sweat, or both, making hoarse, rattling animal noises.

What a way to die! How many others would die this way, or in even more ingeniously inhuman ways, beneath the emotionless alien dictates of the Mo-Sanshon!

And, sometime after that, he discovered that the ghastly torture had stopped. His body reacted like rubber stretched to maximum, then abruptly released. He was rolling, sobbing in an ecstasy of freedom.

He heard the sliding of a grate, and saw a narrow slit of pale light. He couldn't move toward the sound, and even the harsh whisper had little reality for Ward.

"Doc. Doc. It's me, Red. You still kicking?"

Ward listened for a long time before he finally heard a voice resembling his. "I don't know. I really don't know."

"I finally found the subsonic generator and reversed it. Have to do it that way, gradually, or the shock kills you. Took quite a while. I hid the cage down in the cargo hanger, and I stay down there and guarded it most of the time. They've searched almost everywhere, but I keep moving it from place to place. If you want to know how I got in good with the duty watch down there, it cost me a hundred platinum credits. And don't ask me how I got the credits. You sure you're all right now?"

"Guess so. Little weak. What are you going to do now?"

"This is the climax of the 'Hounds of the Void' picture," said Red. "The hero is going to get you out of here. I'm going to wreck the *Sol*. In the confusion we can escape."

"Wreck the—!" Ward subsided in the darkness, resigned.

"It's simple, Doc. I'm going to destroy

the forward fuel-injectors. The braking rockets won't work then, and everybody aboard will have to bail out in air-sleds. They'll never notice us in all the bedlam. We hope."

"But the cage of mercenaries . . . ?"

"Take that along in an air-sled. We won't be the only ones that'll grab up some excess luggage."

"But Red," whispered Ward. "You can't do that until we get inside Mars gravity. By that time the Executive Officer will start working on me again. I couldn't stand another dosage, Red."

That thin cold laugh again. Ward didn't know why he shuddered. "These psychocells fool your duration sense, Doc. We're already inside Mars gravity. You been in there a long time. Here's some food concentrate. Now rest up and be ready. See you."

LATER, Ward's tautly waiting senses were jarred by a thunderous explosion. For a moment it seemed the whole ship would fall apart as the liquid oxygen and its catalyst power units beneath the control turret went off. Even inside the padded walls of his psychocell, Ward could hear the repercussions of the dreadful explosions—cries and screams of fear, horror, confusion, mass hysteria. From an inter-ship audio in the corridor outside his cell door, he heard the Captain's frantic desperate tone, the voice of a man unused to emergencies.

"What has happened down there, Thomas?"

"Forward fuel-injectors completely destroyed, sir. Braking rockets beyond repair."

Panic was ill-concealed in the Captain's voice now. "Break out pressure suits. And prepare air-sleds! Neutralize gravity plates! Abandon ship on signal!"

The *Sol* was a doomed ship. She was well inside Mars' maximum gravity pull, and even its tellalloy hull couldn't stand the unbraked friction of its inevitable roaring drive. The neutralized gravity procedure of the Captain was a frantic irrational command, such a method being employed on asteroids and moons or such byway stops. The *Sol* would soon blister and melt and smash into Mars, a charred shell.

The door opened quickly. The Executive Officer's gross mass filled the glaring light of the opening. Ward struggled to his feet, hopelessly unprepared for fight. He wasn't an aggressive man, physically, and had never been athletic. But he knew the theoretical value of attack, and he leaped with all his minimized strength straight at the massive barrel chest.

Then they were struggling in the narrow, shuddering corridor. The creature made no sound, but fought with a stolid, elephantine power, without emotion or expression. And Ward was like tinsel in those alien arms. His clawing hands found no flesh, but only thick, leathery skin, hard and unresilient. He struggled, writhed, and struck frantically, but nothing about this creature was vulnerable to such an attack. His fists were bruised and smashed. The creature's arms tightened in inexorable jerks about him. His brain was swelling, preparing to burst . . .

The sound was familiar now, the sharp *thunggg* of Red's needle gun. The plopping sound as it pierced the anthropomorphic. He felt the creature stiffen and its arms flew away from Ward, flailing in terrible anguish. An inhuman cry rang in his ears. He saw Red crouched there in that tigerish, fiendish manner he had displayed in the Federal Building.

Again he was watching the incredible, reeling metamorphosis—the rapid disintegration of that towering organism into—

Nothing remained but some buttons and a large zipper talon.

As they ran up the corridor, now growing noticeably warmer from the terrific friction on the hull, Ward's strength seeped slowly back into his veins, and his eyes accustomed themselves to the light. Soon he and Red were molecules in a surging agitated stream of a running, shouting, stamping and utterly frantic mob. No one noticed them in the bedlam.

Suddenly Red grabbed Ward's hand. "Trust me, Doc. I'll take the cage. They will recognize you, and I think I can make it all right. We'll both take different air-sleds. See you."

Ward yelled—but Red was gone in the bedlam. But what could he have said? How could he have objected? It was logically the best way. He trusted Red because

he had to. Ward fought his way through the yammering crowds, got his pressure suit, entered an airlock and climbed into the spherical cramped interior of a jam-packed air-sled.

The Ensign at the controls was visibly trembling. Two ancient dowagers were hysterically screaming like frightened parrots. A chubby, bejeweled Martian Monel Metals representative was taking para-pills to quiet his nerves, enough to kill a horse. He passed out. The daughter of Vasco Von Belson, who practically owned the Space Lines, was clinging to a young man who was, in turn, clinging to someone else and mumbling fearfully about the obviously untrue axiom that everything would be all right.

"This—this sled is overcrowded," quavered the Ensign. "Be calm and don't try to cause trouble. We'll be lucky if we don't smash up. I don't think our levitation plates are sufficiently heterodyned for this great a load. And there's no adjustment can be made at this short notice."

"See here," yelled Ward, "why commit suicide then?"

The Ensign turned a wan face. "I'll try to coast her in. Perhaps the balance is such that a long trajectory and a crash landing is possible."

Then the single light in the air-lock flashed twice. The lock opened, and the air-sled catapulted out with the outrushing atmosphere. Awed, helpless screams reverberated through the jammed interior as they watched the upward hurtling ball of Mars. A reddish crescent blur, with directly below a wide long crimson streak; to the side was the fading radiance of Diemos' disc, while to the other side the planet seems to slumber in a darkness more profound than that of oceanic space, the black tomb where Phobos had just died.

The many air-sleds disgorged by the *Sol* were scattered so that only one or two others were visible in the far distance. And plunging down and away in a smoking trajectory that would take it almost clear around the planet, the *Sol* was crashing to her doom.

And, as far as Ward was concerned, so was the air-sled.

The geography of Mars was discernible. Ward saw the dead sea bottoms of Barsoom, soon obliterated by mountains; the

rusted tundras of Taclos bordered by the thousand-mile-long, towering mountain chain of the Aljontors passed beneath them. On the other side was the seemingly endless red desert expanse that sloped into the artificial Cehlaz Sea and the ancient city of Marsport, formerly Ogolkor.

"I think we can crash-land," said the Ensign faintly. "We could be lighter though." Ward looked down. They were cutting through incredibly rarefied air. The sky was cloudless, of an intensely dark blue shade that spoke at once of a thinned atmosphere. They were crashing directly into the great clay desert. Well, that's where he'd been trying to get all the time, but now he didn't have his mercenaries with him.

The desert—a blazing expanse of ferric oxidized clay, a brilliant red, glazed by centuries of heat and wind until it glistened like the side of a vast porcelain bowl. Veins of millions of cracks that were really gigantic chasms crossed it like the roadways of millions of mad engineers. Deep down in those catacombs were the intricate, unexplored regions of the Mo-Sanshon and practically the whole insect species remaining on Mars. Part of the folklore and legend of the earliest known history of surface tribes, they had been feared, revered, studied, ignored, and ridiculed by successive stages of surface civilization.

A strained, paralyzed silence pervaded the spheroid. Not even a whimper broke it.

"This is it," shouted the Ensign hysterically, and Ward closed his eyes as a long horrible jarring grind seemed to rip his nerves to pieces. . . .

THE red desert was an incredible desolation of dehydrated, shimmering emptiness before Ward's blurred and burning eyes. Dry, gasping heat, enhanced by thin air filled with fine particles of rust. The ancient, devastated planet kept clinging to life; Ward had often wondered why.

The clay on which he was outstretched was like burning metal against his bruised body. Through pain-mist, he saw the twisted wreckage of the air-sled about a hundred feet away. Low hills that looked unbelievably far away—everything wavering feverishly through the shimmering haze. Then he looked down the length of his body at his right leg. It was crushed,

swollen, blue, with little sharp bone splinters edging through tattered flesh.

He unscrewed his helmet and unzipped his pressure suit, to crawl out of it painfully with the shattered leg. He lay, gasping, with fingers scraping along the glazed clay. Phobos was setting in the East again. Deimos was a crimson-rimmed eye, hesitating above the desert before blinking out. He'd been out for quite a while. No other figures were stirring in the yellow moonlight, the startlingly bright moonlight as clear as Earth dusk. Probably all the passengers were dead, or there would be some sign of life, unless those who survived had wandered away.

He gritted his teeth as tears of pain smarted in his eyes; he commenced dragging himself along. He kept crawling. Deimos had set. A thick darkness settled over him, and bitter cold. And, sometime later, just as Phobos rose brightly in the rarefied air, he was stopped by a gaping dark depth of fissure. He had gone as far as he could go toward—

—Where? There wasn't a place for him now. He wanted to see the end of the Mo-Sanshon's dreams of conquest, and he wondered if he ever could, now.

The whining of a jet-car spiraled toward him. The sound of it died, as he saw its shadow settle on the gleaming surface of the desert clay. A Martian make, from the sound, new style. A figure emerged and walked toward him. Soon she was close enough to distinguish in the soft glow of the moonlight.

An unattractive girl was very exceptional. But no less exceptional than beauty such as this girl displayed boldly and proudly. She was running swiftly toward him, the thin gauze garments styled by Martian women moulding her body like wet silk. The soft thin boots of desert *jhan's* hide made no sound on the stone-hard clay. Her shadow elongated across the softly glowing brilliance of the surface like shading in a Rulahn three-dim painting.

Suddenly, intuitively, Ward's skin crawled with horror, and he tried to drag himself away to the edge of the bottomless crevice. Then her arms were reaching down. Her shadow covered him like a shroud. Her hands clutched his jacket and pulled him away from the brink of the abyss.

Ward could sense them now even before they touched him. Their alien radiations impinged on his raw nerves now like a mental file. She appeared so human. But then you touched her, and felt those terrible alien tendrils in your brain, and you knew—

And from some deep reservoir he summoned the strength to act. He grabbed frantically for those shapely, but synthetic legs.

One of them jerked out of reach, but both his hands closed over the other. He heaved sidewise, and the beautiful bronzed torso went over him. Half of it dangled down into the crevice. Her legs flailed for traction. A low grunting as of effort came up stolidly from the chasm, as he tried with rapidly waning strength to push her over. But her arms dug in while she struggled in a frothing sea of titian-colored, synthetic hair that shone in the moonlight like liquid copper. Great surges of alien power battered at his rebounding mind as he fought. The body lifted and the perfect oval face edged into view, twisted with effort. Even, pearly teeth glistened with strain. The weird, intangible light of the whole Mo-Sanshon shown on that rigid expressionless face—no emotion, no human consciousness. A face from an antediluvian hell, with instinctual motivations lost in the slime of time.

Ward called up another ounce of reserve and she cried out as she went almost entirely over the edge of the chasm. She was clinging now with only one leg and arm. He was pushing against that face, beating desperately, sobbing, beating with smashed fists against a beautiful face like thick leather.

And then something emerged into the moonlight out of the crevice.

Ward, etomologist though he was, found it hard to realize that he was looking at a kind of *Corynocoris Distinctus* almost a third as large as a human body. He fell back before it, crawling, dragging himself like a groveling dog. Hideous, unworldly creature, with six horny legs, a pair of popping-out eyes, two shining *ocelli* which looked straight into the rapidly frosting air, and a long, ferocious, quivering beak partly hidden behind one of the forelegs. The furry, spiny horror jumped at him. A sickening stench enveloped him as the

body covered him, the legs pinning him in as in a cage.

Ward felt something insane creeping into his consciousness. He felt his rationality, such as remained, leaking out through his tortured eyes like blood. He prayed for a quick death, now that Red had the cage and would release the mercenaries. What did it matter about him? He was washed up anyway, and—

The titan-haired pseudo-woman with her Dianaesque body and her dead eyes, was on her feet and stood familiarly beside the distorted crab-like *Corynocoris*. Very difficult to believe that they might be from the same stalk. But Ward's senses were dulled now. He lay helplessly waiting. He had lost much blood and had been drained of energy. Her form shifted hazily like a mirage. She must be desperate, filled with burning hatred of him, burning white-hot, and her emotionless, stolid voice was more horrible because of that.

"You did not bring the cage from the ship. But you know where it is, and other information which we demand." A statement. "You must come with me to the Cavern of the Queen."

She said nothing more, only made a gesture and the *Corynocoris* dragged him away. Down into the chasm, down further than Ward dared think about, and through corridors and labyrinthine passages that glowed with a strange phosphorescent effulgence. And reeked with some other vague, intangible quality of alienness that filled Ward's fevered brain with horror.

Mists cleared, thickened, swirled, died and solidified; consciousness returned in degrees of awareness, stirred with nightmare. And, some time later, he heard the toneless voice of the sexless beauty say simply:

"Our Queen. Your conqueror."

HE SHOOK foggy poisonous vapor from his head and sat up. He was in a gigantic cavern of ominous, crushing size, a roughly arching height that disappeared into steamy vapor. Stalactites and stalagmites barred the openings of numerous side tunnels like monstrous teeth in gaping mouths.

From somewhere came the monody of dripping waters. A sickening, silent iridescence filled the chamber of horrors with

a clear yellow light, Ward's eyes focused on—

He shrank back away from the awesome height and the narrow slit of white light high, high above through the mist that might have been the new Martian sun. His eyes kept returning to the thing in the middle of the cavern floor. It rested in a transparent plastic bowl that sat on top of a huge iridescent bell-shaped stalagmite built up through thousands of years of dripping calcareous water.

Inside the bowl rested a giant slug-like body. It exuded a greyish glow as it pulsed and shimmied. Two vast compound eyes looked out into the cavern and a number of simpler eyes moved slowly about with a placid kind of rhythm.

"The Queen," he whispered, repeating the word of the woman-creature. He'd thought it part of a nightmare. His whisper echoed violently through the cavern like a rising wind of fear. The Queen of the Mo-Sanshon. The Queen Mother. Summation, final cause, goal, archetype, of the State.

The woman-creature moved, eyes fixed on the bowl as though communicating.

She finally turned toward where Ward crouched helplessly on the cold, moist stone, his crushed leg projecting out uselessly. The nerveless face moved, gave out sounds like frost. "Our Queen has decided. You know where the cage of mercenaries is. You had it on the *Sol*. Because of your inferior nervous system which is so vulnerable to attack, you will soon give us the information we want. You and the cage are all that stands in our way."

"I don't know where it is," said Ward truthfully. "So regardless of what you do to my inferior nerves, I can't tell you where it is. Someone else took it with them from the *Sol*. Of course you don't believe me."

The great sentient blob of breeding-brain machinery called the Queen Mother, pulsed on without perturbation. The creature beside him seemed unaffected; yet both of them must be trembling with fear, hate and indecision. An organization of females. And up there was the one Queen Mother for the lot of them who layed all the eggs of her species, and dictated the policies for the rest. The workers, soldiers, nurses—everyone was female. Even those

who had assumed male humanoid form, such as the Executive Officer on the *Sol* and the Guard in the Federal Building, they were also female.

And the male—those representatives, those voters of humanoid cultures—where were they? They didn't exist as such. They were simply created as mates for the younger Queens. After the marriage flight they died, after a brief wholly utilitarian span devoted solely to the continuation of the Colony.

And he, Ward, a lowly Male, stood in their way. Ward reasoned that only through intense study over centuries of time had they been able to grasp enough humanoid concepts to even be able to recognize such an impossible situation. He, a lowly male—part of a ruling class!

A twenty-foot, brown, chitinous form scurried ferociously out of the shadows and rushed toward Ward. He tried to rise and escape, but his shattered, swollen leg stopped him in a burst of blinding pain.

It was an incredibly big giant of the Myriapoda class, having a long hard shiny body with many similar pairs of legs, each as large as Ward's finger. He plainly saw, without benefit of microscope now, the pair of antennae, three pairs of mouth parts, two groups of simple *ocelli* which ogled him hungrily. And then Ward's fevered, shocked consciousness was concentrating on the poison fangs projecting out from its first body segment.

He knew they were intended for him.

VERIFICATION came quickly. The woman-creature beside him simply said, "You will be injected with a paralysis secretion. Permanent disability. Its eggs will hatch under your skin, and the larvae will burrow into your body. You will die many kinds of deaths, and you will tell the Queen and the Mo-Sanshon what they want to know. You will tell where the cage is, how the mercenaries are created and how they operate. You will tell us where your notes and formulae are located. After that you will die as all males learn to die—for the Mo-Sanshon."

Ward didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. Protestations would be futile here. The centipede-like monstrosity waved its fangs and edged nearer. The woman-creature spoke again.

"The Queen wishes me to say to you that your humanoid species is unjustified in its egomania. You think humanoids the most rapidly evolving organism in the Solar System, but that belief is not relative enough in regards to duration. Our culture had reached a degree of social organization more highly advanced than yours before what you call the Tertiary epoch. Once our culture ruled a world—Mars. Why did our culture stop, why did it not advance for thousands of years? Why did our marvelous instinctive culture fail to conquer the System? Why have we stood still after perfecting a type of super social science? We simply had advanced as far as we could without benefit of violent, drastic mutation."

"May I ask one question," managed Ward, "before I become food for centipede larvae?" No reply. The centipede writhed impatiently. Ward tried to ignore it. "How," he asked, "do you create these imitation human organisms?"

"Specialization. Of specialization the so-called 'insect' species are the accepted genius of all species of life wherever they are found. Given species can reproduce equal, and in many cases superior, creations of humanoid intelligence by individual adaptation. There are more specialized types among our kind than all other organisms in the System combined. The Mo-Sanshon is now master of them all."

That was, of course, true, thought Ward. There were insects that could spin cables stronger in ratio than any alloy strands, could create acids that undermined stone and steel, could create cities that, in proportion, dwarfed human cities into significance; they had perfected telepathy; they could grow wings, develop gills and live in water as mud or marine worms, or fly in the air, or burrow into the land. Their superiority was accomplished through specialized millions of marvelous individual instincts.

The centipede moved close, and its *ocelli* gazed at Ward fixedly. Its many legs quivered. Its fangs reached out and brushed lightly over Ward's shrinking body.

"Where is the mercenary cage?" the voice asked again.

Ward said weakly, "I don't know." He thought of a nice home-loving girl back in Midcity who could cook wonderfully

and who liked babies and whose name was Ann, before he said, "Tell the damn centipede to get it over with."

The centipede struck, but in the middle of its darting move a crackling explosion hit it. Its chitinous shell curled, crackled, and the centipede knotted up into a tight burned lump.

A SCREAM of hate and fear rang through the colossal cavern beneath the Martian deserts. Ward turned, his eyes dimmed. It was Red. Somewhere he had gotten hold of an electronic blaster and had paused, blasted the centipede, and was now running on across the cavern. He held the levitated cage easily in one hand.

He waved the gun at Ward and his thin face smiled. He stopped half way between Ward and the towering translucent bowl that housed the Queen Mother of the Mo-Sanshon. But the normal pulsing of the giant breeding brain was visibly agitated now. It shivered in pounding undulations. Waves of frantic force emanated from its throbbing bulk.

Ward saw the woman-creature beside him lean forward, her hands trembling. Her voice was a bit higher, that was all. "You! You live, Molakh! You were dead!"

Red laughed as he unfastened the cage door. It was a drawn taut laugh, without mirth. Ward yelled, "Red! I understand now! Don't open it! Suicide if you—"

Red's face was a mask of hate and conflicting emotions in the yellow glow. The makeup was almost all gone, giving his face a ragged, weird aspect.

"Right, Doc," he said. "A radical male. A revolting male. We get them every once in a while here. There are many kinds of mutation. They use them for experimentation in the laboratories. You should see the laboratories here, Doc, with bugs secreting chemicals and living bodies as test tubes. I was one of their recent experiments with humanoid duplication. They thought they had disposed of me, but I eluded them. I'm a slippery individual, you know. I found out about your work and knew you were right, and I decided to help you. Only I could have helped you, Doc. Thanks, Doc, for the adventure. You'll never know what it means to feel the grandeur of the stars—you've never been a myopic bug."

THE gray pulpy mass in the bowl was shivering now, pulsing in great heavings like a heart, dying. And then a dull growing swishing was audible from all sides like a slowly rising wind.

Ward saw the polyglot of insect horror that was edging in through the various tunnels and corridors. Great, jumping spiders with hairy legs and many coal-black glittering eyes and poison fangs dripping below. Winged Hippiscus with huge jaws working hungrily. Sharp-jawed Paratenodera, and shining-winged Cementarium. And countless others, though ant and termite forms dominated, with a grotesque intermingling of anthropomorphic shapes that had assumed almost every possible degree of distortion of human development.

And in the center of the ring stood Red with the cage unfastened. Ward's mouth was cotten. His heart pounded madly. His face exuded streams of sweat. Red, a Mo-Sanshon, a rebel, a mutant. No wonder he had talked of how he longed for freedom. How he had hated female culture, the Mo-Sanshon! The synthesization and study had brought about a high degree of anthropology, although his acquired knowledge of human culture had been of the past rather than the present. His revolt had been one of extremes. He came from a social system whose complete submergence in the colony struck his individualism with horror, and he had reacted to the opposite extreme—a worship of anarchy.

"No, Red!" Ward was screaming wildly, irrationally. "Don't open it! If you do—" But then the ring of monsters would anyway.

Red's answer was to open the cage.

Shuddering, retching, Ward closed his eyes. His experiments had enabled him to breed and evolve strains of armored, ferocious parasite insects and germs which could be bred in millions, any number required, and whose powers of reproduction was enormous. Soon there'd be a stupendous army of these warrior insects who would specifically and effectively control the Mo-Sanshon. He had perfected these mercenaries in laboratories, and had succeeded in isolating and inbreeding, by the most intricate processes involving ray mu-

tation of infinitely small genes. He had cultivated new insect-like forms, like one of our other ancient scientists did garden peas. Armies of insects to do man's fighting for him against his insect enemies.

He had developed a thousand living specimens and tested them. Any opposing species of insect, regardless of size, they devoured immediately. The thousand were in that cage. They would sweep across the insects they were bred to destroy and devour it in seconds, as their own ant-prototypes stripped humans to bare skeletons in seconds.

Ward had to open his eyes again. He was crawling . . . crawling . . . dragging his infected leg behind him, unconscious of the pain. Crawling beneath a dense, black buzzing cloud of whirring wings and clicking mandibles. The vengeful army of insect mercenaries were descending on the helpless Queen Mother in swarms, and the ring of insects that had been closing in were now trying frantically to escape. Many of them did. But the mercenaries would hunt them out. They were specialized mass killers.

And the first one they had gotten, of course, had been Red.

THE dense hordes of enthusiastic insect warriors ignored Ward as he crawled to the cage. Nothing remained of Red except his clothing, shredded, and a few bits of tendons on which mercenaries still fed ferociously. And a tattered copy of an ancient Twentieth Century thriller called "Hounds of the Void."

High overhead, a direct beam of sunlight filtered down through the spiraling vapor, glinted on sheeny wings, as Ward sprawled out on the hard, cold stone. He would make it all right now. There would be evidence now to clear him of his psycho label, and the Mo-Sanshon would be wiped out. But Red was gone. Red, the Adventurer.

Ward wondered why it hadn't occurred to him before. He, an entomologist, too. But the pronunciation had fooled him. The sharp accent on the "i" had distorted its true significance. Spelled out, Formica meant ANT, of course.

RED ANT.



MOON OF DANGER

By Albert de Pina

The huge ship from Mars bore on toward Earth with the last haggard survivors of a terrible plague. But Ric Martin hurtled to intercept the spacegiant, knowing it brought an evil far deadlier than even the relentless metal-spores it fled!

IN approximately two more hours," Dar Mihelson said, "the ionization towers will fail. Look well upon your world, for we may never return."

He was a huge, stern-visaged man, with the weight of his responsibility showing upon him, but his voice was soft as he spoke to his people through the ship's central televisé.

"This is our last chance for survival. Upon the success of this flight depends our very lives, and the preservation of the race. Venus is denied to us. Mercury has thrown up a barricade for ten thousand miles around their planet. Only Earth has offered us sanctuary—and even there a growing faction has risen against us in fear that some of the deadly spores may be transported to their planet."

Dar Mihelson paused, turned his bronze face to look out upon his world. His violet eyes brimmed with anguish. Only the walls of red metallic dust could be seen, the appalling clouds that had surged from the furthest reaches of the planet to wipe out most of the populace, destroying cities, crumbling everything metallic and thereby adding unto itself. It had been a race of their science against time. The Ionization Towers had held back the dust, only long enough for the huge spaceship to be completed.

"We want to go peaceably," Dar Mihelson continued, "but we are prepared for any contingency. Many of you have wondered about the Valiant's unusual construction; some of you have doubted that the ship is capable. True, its secret is known only to a few, but this much I can tell you



They brought their electros into play.

now: the *Valiant* is a fully-equipped fighting ship, and we will use it as such if the occasion arises!"

The lines smoothed from Mihelson's face, as he concluded, "You have all been assigned to your quarters. The take-off will be in thirty minutes. Let us spend that time in prayer to merciful Providence, to guide us safely through our crisis. . . ."

I

RIC MARTIN could feel the excitement already, as he eased his gyro closer to Mount Palomar and saw the great Observatory dome just below him. The night was dark, ideal for observation. The greatest minds of Earth would be here this night, to watch a world and its people in their death-throes.

Ric's face went grim at the thought of it. For weeks the tele-casts had been jammed with the news. Mars was dying, and Mars had been a friendly neighbor for decades. Earth had been helpless to act. No one, not even the Martians, knew where the mysterious Red Plague came from; it had appeared simultaneously in a score of places across the planet, quickly spreading and destroying everything before it.

After prolonged hesitancy, the Earth Council had agreed to accept the Mars refugees. Thereupon a brooding dread and mistrust had swept across Earth like a patina. A new political faction, the anti-Mars sect, had arisen and was gathering strength. There would surely be trouble . . .

A shrill siren blast brought Ric out of his reverie. He glanced back, saw a white-winged police 'copter descending upon him.

"Damn!" Ric set his plane down on the broad field atop Palomar, as the police 'copter came down beside him. Ric stepped out, straightened his uniform and waited.

"How'd you ever get through our lines?" the officer demanded suspiciously. "Don't you know this is the night of the Mars take-off? No one's permitted up here!"

"Sure, I know. But I have a special pass to this shindig." Ric produced a card signed by Professor George Broxted, and the name was magical.

"Very good, sir. Sorry to have detained you!" The officer stared after Ric's departing figure as though wondering how a Captain of the Interstellar Fleet could gain

admittance here where so many big-names had failed.

And even Ric didn't realize what an occasion this was until he reached the tower. Every outstanding figure in the scientific as well as the political world was here, gathered in tense groups about the huge tele-panel in the center of the room. This Mars take-off was certainly the most dramatic event in all Mars' history and perhaps Earth's as well!

Professor Broxted spied him, came over and shook hands.

"Good evening, Ric! I won't bother with introductions. No one cares about that tonight. Glad you could make it!"

"So am I, Professor. I wouldn't have missed this. How much time?"

"Take-off's in twenty minutes, but we've already got the scene in focus. We can bring it to a distance of a few miles, thanks to the new magni-beams. Come."

They threaded their way toward the huge screen to stare at the scene pictured there.

IT WAS a terribly changed Mars that Ric looked upon. The blood-red metallic haze covered all but a mile-wide strip of clear atmosphere; and along this strip Ric could see tiny dots of white light, which he guessed must be the Ionization Towers.

"There's the *Valiant*," Broxted said. "You can just see it on the lower edge of the screen."

Ric peered—then gave a gasp of disbelief. Even at this distance, it was apparent that the ship had tremendous bulk and stretched for fully a mile!

"They're going to hoist gravs in that? It will fall apart!"

"There are some here tonight," Broxted's voice lowered, "who hope that will happen. The *Valiant* was built in record time under supervision of Dar Mihelson. It's supposed to have a new type of anti-grav." Broxted paused. "I knew Dar Mihelson well, when I was at Mars University two years ago. A fine man, and I trust him still. He's given his word that not a spore will reach Earth, and every precaution will be taken!"

"It's a ticklish situation."

"Yes. And believe me, the anti-Mars faction here has grown more than anyone dreams! There've been secret meetings, and tonight may set everything off. Ric . . .

if the *Valiant* manages to up graves, keep your eyes open! Wessell's here!"

Ric's brows furrowed, beneath his shock of blond hair. Yes, Wessell *would* be here. Felix Wessell was Supreme Commander of Earth's Interstellar Fleet, and he'd been particularly bitter in his denunciation of the Earth Council's decision to accept the Mars refugees. There had even been rumors that Wessell was holding the Fleet in readiness, if necessary, to prevent the *Valiant* from landing on Earth. The man wielded a powerful influence.

Ric looked about him now but didn't see his superior, Wessell, and didn't want to. He did see Lal Disbro, the Martian Ambassador. Disbro and his aides had been stranded on Earth when the sudden malady struck his planet. Now the man was a disconsolate figure who seemed to have aged ten years in as many weeks, knowing that only a few of his people were left and even their fate was an imponderable.

It was largely due to Disbro's frantic efforts that the Earth Council had agreed to accept the *Valiant*—and then only after appeals to Venus and Mercury had been coldly refused. Looking at Disbro now, Ric felt truly sorry for him.

IT'S ALMOST TIME!" Broxted touched Ric's arm. The telescopic sights were being set to follow the *Valiant* in its flight. There was tension in the room and sudden, deathly silence. Could the clumsy bulk of the *Valiant* really hoist graves, or would it crack up against the wastes of Mars? The future of a race was in the balance.

The televisé took on a deeper glow. The entire planet of Mars was a backdrop across the screen. The seconds ticked off. Suddenly then . . . the *Valiant* moved! It seemed to shudder for a moment under unleashed power. Then it slid slowly forward across sand.

For a few seconds the scene wavered. The watchers couldn't tell what was happening. Ric gave a quick glance at Lal Disbro. The man's face had gone pale.

Now it was apparent that the great ship was rising as a bulk, to hang poised, fighting against gravity. Then the flash of rockets was plainly seen—literally dozens of

them, spaced in parallel rows across the long underhull.

The scene was silent and unreal. But there was no doubt in any man's mind, now—the ship had lifted graves and was blasting! Slowly, the great lumbering shape widened the distance. The scene resolved to the blackness of outer space where a glitter of stars was seen. There the *Valiant* steadied on her course.

The worst was over. It had been dramatic, momentous. Ric heard sighs of relief about him. People were congratulating Lal Disbro, whose face was wreathed in smiles.

But there were men in this room who did not smile, who were strangely silent. Again Ric allowed his gaze to sweep about—and this time he spotted Wessell.

The man was tall, hard-featured, crisp of manner. His eyes were stern as he leaned a little forward to peer at the screen. Ric watched him. Wessell's only show of emotion was a slight twitching at the corners of his mouth. Now that the *Valiant* had gained free space he was studying it, studying it hard. His lips curled a little in disdain.

Ric glanced again at the screen. The Martian ship *was* clumsy, there was no denying it. On its slow and careful course it would take perhaps six days to reach Earth. Much could happen in six days. . . .

Then he saw Wessell rise. The man crossed to the private room where the communicators were kept. Through the partly open door Ric saw him lift a tube and speak into it with crisp authority.

"Trouble," Ric muttered. "I knew it!" And there were cold, coiling knots in the pit of his stomach.

When he bade Broxted goodbye a few minutes later, and headed back for the city, it was with a feeling of dark events brewing—events that were going to touch him whether he liked it or not.

II

IT CAME VERY SOON. The harsh buzzing of the ampliphone beside Ric's bed jerked him awake. "Hello," he said sleepily. "Ric Martin. . . ."

Then sleep was gone from him, as he listened to the voice of his Unit Commander.

"Very well, sir. Yes . . . yes, I understand. At once!" He slammed off the switch and began dressing quickly. This was it! He'd been called back to duty at two in the morning. In thirty-six hours the Coast Fleet was to join the Chicago Fleet at a rendezvous a hundred miles in space, and there prepare in battle formation.

"Wessell," he muttered. "I didn't think he'd really do it! Those poor Martians. . . ."

By the time he reached Government Spaceport, Ric's heart was bitter within him. How could the plodding *Valiant* hope to stand against even two Units of Earth's Fleet? True, Wessell's move was in direct defiance of the Council's edict, but he was moving swiftly! Ric had never reached a decision as to what he, as a Captain in Earth's Fleet, would do if Wessell attempted to carry out his high-handed plan. He had been trained to obey orders implicitly and unquestioningly.

But this was wrong and Ric knew it was wrong. He made his decision now. Setting down at the edge of the Spaceport, he hurried to the building housing the tiny Patrol cruisers. These ships were swift and secret, with tubes of the new allotropic metal recently found on Mercury. Access to them could be attained only by special Government pass.

As he neared the doors, a guard stepped out of the shadows. The man recognized Ric's uniform but he remained alert, hand hovering near his parala-gun, as he gave a challenge.

"Wessell's orders," Ric replied tersely. "Emergency!"

"Sorry, sir. You know this requires special—"

"All right," Ric sighed. "Here's my pass!" He saw the guard relax for an instant. Ric poised on his toes and unleashed a long left that sent the guard staggering against the building. The man righted himself, muttered an oath and came boring in. But already Ric was following through with a vicious right; it connected with the angle of the guard's jaw, and he went down. Then Ric was inside the doors, sprinting down the corridor.

He found the hangar of the *Falcon*, a swift three-man cruiser which he knew well. A glance at the power-board showed him that it was fueled and ready. A minute

later he was blasting upward, watching the city's lights drop swiftly away.

Once in free space, he set the robot-control. It would be thirty hours before he intercepted the *Valiant* somewhere in its plodding path for Earth. At least he could warn them! For he knew, now, that Wessell meant to go all the way—utter annihilation for the *Valiant*!

And this meant revolt—the overthrow of Earth's Supreme Council! Wessell had waited a long time for this, and there were men behind him, ready to back him to the hilt. The Mars crisis had provided a convenient spark.

But Ric wasn't thinking of Wessell now, nor the Earth Council, as he settled down to watchfulness. He was thinking of two thousand Martians, the last of their race, struggling to keep alive this last thin life-line of survival. He was thinking of death in space. Even if he warned them of Wessell's plan—where were they to go?

HOURS LATER, his probing magnifier picked out the *Valiant* from the depths of blackness. It was still vastly far away, a mere pin-point in his V-Panel, but Ric cut acceleration. He watched the Martian ship grow larger by the hour. He switched to his radio-beam and sent a message through, but it remained unanswered.

It was still unanswered when he drew close enough to cut his rockets altogether and go into a drift. Surely they were radio-equipped? There was only one explanation. They simply weren't expecting a spacer out here, so their beam was off power.

They wouldn't spot him, either. The *Falcon* was tiny by comparison, and solid black, undetectable against the backdrop of space. But he'd have to get aboard the *Valiant* some way! Slowly he brought his cruiser beneath the great ship's hull. He was more than ever impressed by the size of this Martian colossus.

And he was puzzled. There was something strange about this ship's construction. It was more than merely clumsy, it was grotesque! Carefully he eased along, examining it. For one thing there were too many air-locks, even for a ship of this size. Ric shook his head in puzzlement.

He began trying his tractor beam on those locks, tightening the beam slowly. The locks held. Still he persisted, easing

the *Falcon* along the hull; he had to gain an entrance somewhere! With any kind of luck. . . .

Then, somewhere amidships, one of the locks opened under the steady pull of his beam. Slowly it swung outward. Ric's hands flew to the controls. Carefully he eased the *Falcon* forward and into the lock. There was room to spare. The outer door closed and he heard generators humming, automatically building up an atmosphere. Finally they stopped and he knew it was safe. He leaped down from the *Falcon*.

The inner door was swinging back automatically. For a moment Ric hesitated; then he stepped through, saw that he was in some sort of control room. There were instruments such as he'd never seen in any spacer! He stared around uncertainly. Then from behind him came a queerly accented voice.

"Greetings, Earthman. But I won't say welcome, yet. You will please turn around—slowly!"

RIC turned. A Martian holding a heat-gun stepped from behind a bulwark. The Martian came forward and the gun got playful with the third button on Ric's tunic.

Ric had expected this. Naturally they'd be suspicious of an Earthman aboard—but he could soon explain things. He stepped back a little from the gun.

"I'm friendly. I must see Dar Mihelson at once! I come with urgent news!"

"So? What news?"

"Wessell's massing the Earth Fleet. In thirty-six hours they'll be out here to meet you. He'll never allow you to land on Earth!"

"So. Hear that, Kueelo?" He addressed a second Martian who was busy at work over a bank of levers.

This man looked up and grinned, and Ric liked him even less than the one crowding him. He especially didn't like the eyes. They were strange and colorless, not quite Martian.

"Yes, I heard. Take care of him, Luhor; we haven't much time!"

Luhor surged forward, bringing the gun up. Ric swayed to the right, his hands darted out and caught the man's free wrist; with the same motion he twisted, and brought Luhor sailing across his body to

crash into a metal beam, where he slumped and lay still.

Kueelo had whirled, muttering an oath that certainly wasn't Martian. Now he leaped for the free gun. Ric reached it a second faster, kicked it out of reach. He parried Kueelo's fist—then sent a left to the Martian's stomach and crossed with a right. The man was huge, and stood his ground.

Ric danced back as Kueelo came boring in. He realized joyously that this lesser, artificial gravity was an advantage. He sent a boxer's left, long and weaving, to Kueelo's face, then a second and third, that set the Martian off balance. Ric stepped in with a crashing right-cross. Kueelo's legs went rubbery. Another smashing right and the Martian's face lost contour; he whirled half around and slumped across the bank of levers. Ric rolled his body away and stood looking down.

There were thirty of those levers, all numbered. They were large and heavy, but just now they were all pulled up from their contacts, revealing masses of coils and wires. Ric frowned, wondering what it meant. He thought he knew!

Those wires could be easily fused or cut. Ric recognized sabotage when he saw it. . . .

He glanced at Kueelo. The man would be out for some time. He stepped to the one called Luhor, bent quickly over him. The man was dead, his skull crushed. Momentary panic flooded over Ric. After all, he could be wrong; if he'd blundered, he'd have to account for this!

He rose, looked around for an intercommunication system. He couldn't spot one. This ship was utterly alien to him. He did find another door, however, and stepped out into a corridor.

Ric gasped. This corridor extended for well over half a mile ahead of him, and as far behind—straight through the heart of the ship. This was a colossus indeed! Far ahead he could see a few men moving about, but if they noticed him at that distance they gave no sign of it. He started to walk in that direction, but a crisp voice stopped him.

"Hold it, Earthman!" Something hard and heavy jabbed into his back. "You are very careless, Earthman. Your blow stunned me, but Martians recover easily.

And you forgot to take the heat-gun."

Ric shot a glance over his shoulder. It was Kueelo all right, he of the colorless eyes.

"Martian? Phobian half-breed, you mean! Those eyes—"

"Never mind!" The gun jabbed harder. "No tricks with your hands this time, if you want to stay alive. Turn around—slowly! Let us march in the *other* direction."

THEY walked along the empty corridor. Ric's mind was in turmoil. A half-breed aboard this ship was unthinkable! They passed strange, curved bulkheads abutting on the corridor. Ric couldn't understand them either. Everything about this ship was puzzling.

"I'm really glad you came, Earthman. It makes my task easier!"

"You mean—"

"Yes. I shall leave the *Valiant* to the Earth Fleet. But when that happens *we* won't be there." He chuckled. "You don't understand? But you will—soon."

They paused before a bulkhead with "UNIT 26" blazoned on the door. Kueelo rapped sharply. After a long moment the door opened slightly. Kueelo thrust it wide, shoved Ric forward and stepped in quickly behind him. Ric caught a glimpse of a dozen people in this room, men and women alike. There were startled gasps as Kueelo waved the heat gun at them.

"Back! Move back all of you, and quickly! You, Earthman—get over there with them."

Ric joined the group, saw a slow grin come over Kueelo's face. The other Martians were stunned, speechless, partly at the sight of an Earthman aboard but mainly because one of their kind stood there waving a lethal weapon at them.

Then Ric heard a gasp from a Martian girl standing near him, and she clutched at the arm of her companion.

"Tal . . . it's he, the same one! He managed to get aboard!"

Kueelo flashed them a glance, bowed mockingly. "Yes. So our paths cross again, Tal Horan. How fortunate for me!" His smile faded. "Naric! You may come forward now. I shall need you."

A tall brooding Martian came from the group to stand at Kueelo's side. He too

produced a heat gun and helped to keep the others covered. He jerked his head toward the inner corridor. "How did things go?"

"This Earthman interfered. Luhor is dead. It doesn't matter now, we have to get away from here fast! Wessell is bringing out the Earth Fleet!"

Ric heard mutterings about him and knew that any moment these two renegades were going to have their hands full. Kueelo knew it, too. He opened the door again and motioned the group through, as he and Naric kept them carefully covered.

"You may stay and fight it out with your brave Commander," Kueelo told them mockingly. "*We* have plans a little less foolhardy . . . no, these two stay," he told Naric, indicating Tal Horan and the girl. "The Earthman, too!"

One of the Martians leaped forward, making a try for Kueelo's gun. Kueelo blasted him down calmly, the heat beam making a charred hole completely through the man's neck. The others dragged him out, the door clanged shut and the five of them were alone in Unit 26.

"Quickly now! They'll be giving the alarm! Naric, take the controls while I release the plates. But first . . ." Kueelo faced the three, holding a different type of gun, shorter and thicker. Without warning he aimed it at the floor near their feet. A projectile burst, a pinkish gas sprayed quickly up.

Ric tried to leap forward, but now he couldn't move! Intuition told him to hold his breath. He glimpsed Tal Horan trying to support the girl as she slumped to the floor. But Tal was going down too, slowly, his eyes burning hatred. Then things blurred for Ric. Somehow he kept himself erect as a shadow swayed toward him. His head seemed to burst, but he knew it wasn't the gas . . . it was Kueelo's gun crashing down. . . .

III

SOMEONE slapped his face, a voice sounded urgently in his ear. Ric opened his eyes and looked up at Tal Horan, whose lean face broke into a grin.

"That's better. Kueelo must have hit you pretty hard!"

Ric struggled up. His head ached. They,

were somewhere in a tiny room, and he could hear a thin whine of rocket tubes under full blast. The Martian girl was standing near, her attention torn between the Earthman and a view-plate looking out into space.

Ric walked a bit unsteadily to the view-plate. Far away in space he saw the *Valiant* still plodding its course, but their Unit seemed to be blasting away from it at a sharp tangent!

"Dar Mihelson anticipated trouble with the Earth Fleet," Tal Horan answered Ric's puzzled glance. "No spores are going to Earth, but he's determined to fight if necessary. We only want a place to live, Earthman, until we can get back to Mars and wipe out that red plague!"

"The name's Ric Martin. But look, Tal . . . Mihelson mustn't fight! He can't possibly stand against Wessell's fleet!"

"I've counselled against it, but Mihelson is Commander and he's determined if it comes to a showdown—"

"Look!" The girl was pointing into the view-plate. Far ahead of the *Valiant*, across thousands of miles of space, they could see a tiny pin-point of moving light. The Earth Fleet was moving out fast.

"Tal . . . Ric Martin is right. It will mean annihilation for our people. But the *Valiant* has speed! If we could only get a message through to Mihelson. . . ."

Ric strode to the door, tested it. It was locked. He turned back to Tal. "Where's Kueelo and his pal?"

"Busy at the controls, I guess. They threw us in here."

Quickly Ric searched through his pockets, brought out a disc a few inches in diameter, with a milky-white crystallized facing. Inside were highly sensitized coils, and it was rimmed with a sliding sheathe.

"Short distance trans-telecor," he explained. "Now if I can only get the *Valiant's* wave length!"

He clicked a switch and manipulated the dials with swift surety. A bit of crackling came through but nothing more. He increased the power. "Afraid we're out of range, and we're moving away fast! Wait. . . ."

The dial began to glow with an inner light. A man's face appeared there, rather fuzzy and indistinct. Ric moved the dials infinitesimally and a faint voice was heard.

"Quickly!" Ric held the disc to Tal Horan's lips.

But the girl came forward. "Allow me, Tal! It is time that Dar Mihelson knew. . . ." She spoke crisply. "Unit Twenty-six calling the *Valiant*! We're moving away fast so listen carefully, Dar Mihelson! You must not fight—it would mean destruction! Look to your magni-plates . . . use your speed, and stay out of Earth Fleet's range!"

Mihelson's answer filtered through, something about "Fight to the death. . . ."

The girl's eyes flashed, she became magnificent. Her voice took a tone of unmistakable authority.

"It is Praana speaking, the Princess Praana, daughter of Bedril! I order you not to fight, Dar Mihelson! You will not place my people in such peril!"

A thousand miles away on the *Valiant's* huge televiser, Praana's face must have been visible. She realized that instantly, and went on.

"I am in disguise, Dar Mihelson! It was Bedril's last order, and we planned this well. I must remain as a rallying point for my people in the time of their direst stress. The time is now! Mihelson . . . you know my voice, do you not?"

"But what are we to do, your Eminence? We cannot return to Mars . . . Wessell blocks our way to Earth. . . ."

AFTER a moment of indecision, Ric whispered, "You're sure he has speed? He could outrace the Earth Fleet?"

"Yes! You will see!"

"The moon, then. Earth's moon! The crater Tycho. . . ."

"Dar Mihelson," she spoke again. "You must get past Earth's fleet. You can do that, with the element of surprise; then head for Earth's moon! Swing around it once and enter Tycho! You will find airlocks there at the abandoned mines, and tunnels leading deep inside. You will be safe for a while! Await further word from me . . . I shall contact you again, I promise it!"

Already the wave-length was becoming tenuous, but Praana was sure her final words had reached him. Ric snapped off the disc.

A voice behind them brought them whirling around.

KUEELO stood in the doorway, heat-gun held ready as always. He laughed mockingly.

"So. A handy little gadget that is, Earthman. And you really managed to contact Dar Mihelson with it?" he shrugged. "That is all right—we shall have entertainment now. It will be interesting to see how he out-manuevers the Earth Fleet! If you three will join me?"

They walked ahead of Kueelo, into a room where a visipanel had already centered the *Valiant* and was following its slow progress. Naric appeared in the doorway behind them, and remained watchful. Kueelo stepped to the screen and manipulated the magni-lens.

The space scene seemed to widen, draw away a little . . . then the Earth Fleet could be seen. Even at this distance it appeared formidable. In staggered horizontal tiers, perhaps fifty of Earth's cruisers had arrayed themselves under Wessell's command. Breathlessly they watched, from their own ship which was already speeding far out of range.

Ric noticed one thing. The Earth ships were all of the heavy type, built for concentrated power-blasts rather than speed. Mihelson might out-manuever them, but, if he chose to fight . . .

The Fleet was almost in range of the *Valiant* now, and still the Mars ship continued its plodding course. It was unlikely that Wessell suspected anything. He was approaching slowly to make sure of doing a thorough job. It was sheer treachery; worse, it was murder! In that moment Ric felt almost ashamed of being an Earthman.

Suddenly, from the prow of the *Valiant* a beam of light probed forth to cut the gap of darkness like a slashing saber. Once, twice, three times it slashed. This was the accepted signal for a parley in space.

Tal Horan muttered and moved restlessly. Praana's golden face had gone pale. Surely Dar Mihelson was not going to parley! He must know what awaited him! Speed was the only salvation now.

From Earth's flagship the answering signal came. And then, although the *Valiant* still moved, the Earth Fleet applied forward rockets and began to slow appreciably. Mihelson's strategy was apparent now!

This would give him precious seconds needed for acceleration!

And then it came. Without warning the *Valiant* seemed to burst apart. To the watchers from afar it was startling; to Wessell it must have been unbelievable. Some thirty Units, each a spaceship in itself, moved outward in an ever widening circle . . . then all of space seemed aflame as the rockets burst into action. The Mars spacers sped straight at the Earth Fleet, but the circle was widening now and they passed safely *around* the Fleet, around and beyond it and were gaining acceleration even as the Earth cruisers tried to reverse their drift!

One of the Earth ships opened up with its rear-action ray blasts. Slicing, probing angrily, the livid blue rays tried to intercept the fleeting Martian Units. Two of the rays converged upon one of the Units and held there. The Martian ship grew fiery red, seemed to falter . . . then exploded into holocaust.

But the others were beyond range now and gaining acceleration with each second. Even the atomo-bombs, hurled recklessly, fell far short. By the time the Earth Fleet had reversed, the Martian ships were disappearing dots of light, heading for Earth.

"Mihelson did well!" Kueelo said, and whirled dials that dissolved the scene. "Only one Unit lost. But I have the most important Unit . . . do I not, Princess Praana!" His voice was mocking; it seemed to have secret meaning.

"Phobian half-breed!" Tal Horan's face was tight with hate. "Murderers and traitors, all of you . . . since time began! Ric, I had an encounter with this man back on Mars, at one of the Ionization Towers. He tried to get my identity card so he could come aboard the *Valiant*. How'd you manage it, Kueelo?"

"Never mind, Tal." It was Praana who spoke softly, but her slender body was taut, her golden face showed a pallor. "Where are you taking us, Kueelo?"

"Ah, so you are curious at last! Observe." Again the screen came to life. Ahead of them loomed the bright red disc of Mars! They had made a sweeping parabola and were heading back toward the planet.

Kueelo spoke again, and for once his voice lost its mockery. "Observe further,

The Towers have failed, the plague has conquered. Mars is a dead world now. I know that Emperor Bedril and his group of scientists remained there. He was a brave man, I admit—but foolish. This was inevitable."

Praana turned her head away. Tal Horan said bitterly, "I wish I had stayed to die with him! At least our work—"

"Yes! I am aware, Tal Horan, that you were working with Bedril on the atomic breakdown of the new Mercury metal, with which you hoped to combat the plague." Kueelo's eyes became bright. "I am sure you must have gone far. Well . . . we have worked on the same principle, and I'm sure your formula will be useful to us!"

"We?" Tal was puzzled.

Kueelo merely grinned, waved a hand at the televiser.

They were skirting Mars. Now a tiny world moved unerringly toward them. It was a dark, airless little world of crags and shadows, but it was unmistakable. Mars' smaller moon . . . Phobos!

IV

YOU may watch if you wish. I'm going to treat you to as masterful a piece of navigation as you've ever seen." Kueelo stood at the control board, hands ready, eyes fastened on the panorama spreading below them. "You especially should appreciate this, Earthman! Naric, keep them covered."

Phobos rushed up before them, a horribly barren world that seemed to encompass all of space. Closer it came, but Kueelo didn't check his drive. They could see vast plains dotted with craters, and huge serrated cliffs reaching up.

At last Kueelo applied his forward thrust, and they levelled out. Half around the planet they raced. A mountain range loomed. The spacer dipped sharply, driving straight at it! Ric was taut, sweat glistening on his brow. No ship could ever brake in time at that suicidal speed! He merely closed his eyes, awaiting the inevitable.

A sudden force sent him reeling. A profound nausea made him retch. Then Kueelo was at his side, touching his shoulder.

"How was that, Earthman?" Kueelo

laughed. "Don't worry, we're safe now!"

White-faced and shaken, Ric opened his eyes. They had entered a place of semi-darkness, but were still moving ahead.

"Where are we?"

"Inside the cliffs! We've entered a magnetic field that arrests speed and mass synchronously. We are being slowed in a graduating net of force."

In a few minutes they had come to a complete rest, but Kueelo told them, "Stay where you are! Our trip isn't over yet."

Ric peered into the forward screen. Darkness encompassed them. He turned questioningly. Kueelo grinned and gestured downward.

"You mean we're going inside this planet?"

"Yes. *Very* far inside. We're on the downward beams now. Patience, Earthman, you'll see many amazing things before we're through."

It took a long time, and there was no telling how far they'd gone or with what speed. They seemed not to be moving at all. But at last a faint blue radiance appeared, and Kueelo opened the lock.

They stepped out onto a ledge which extended perhaps a hundred yards, then dropped sheerly away. The walls curving up were of polished smoothness, and stretched away into unimaginable distances. The soft bluish light came from these walls and seemed to pervade the whole interior of this hollow world. The air was damp but comfortably warm. And the gravity . . .

Praana clutched at Tal Horan's arm. "This is almost Mars gravity! But . . . where do they get it?"

"Yes, we'll have to look into that later." Tal cautioned her to silence.

A three-wheeled car was waiting for them. Kueelo hurried them into it, and Naric took the controls. Soon they were speeding away, and they gasped as their ledge tapered off into nothingness! They were traversing the inside of the shell itself.

"It's eerie at first," Kueelo told them, "but you'll soon become accustomed to our gravity. Just imagine the space out there as being *up*. The only difference is that our light comes from the surface instead of overhead."

"What's the interior diameter?" Ric gestured outward.

"About three hundred miles. And you were wondering about our gravity, Tal Horan? It comes from out there!" Kueelo gestured vaguely at the gray-blue interior. "Our power plant is anchored in space at the exact center of Phobos. But it's reverse gravity—that is to say, its force extends *outward* toward the shell, instead of pulling inward."

Tal saw that the man was communicative. He nodded thoughtfully. "Quite an engineering feat! It must have taken a long time to set up all this!"

"Two generations! It was not done in my time."

"Where are we going now?"

"To the city of the Phobians."

Praana gasped. "Native Phobians? But there are no Phobians left! For three hundred years—"

"That's the popular supposition, and it suits our convenience. Yes, three hundred years ago the war between Mars and Phobos was supposed to have ended. But you shall see! Perhaps Gorak himself will have much to tell you."

"Gorak?"

"The present Phobian leader! There are only a few thousand Phobians remaining, as there are only a few thousand of your people. Ironical, is it not . . . Princess Praana?"

THE CITY came into view, a sheer grotesquerie of impossible buildings jutting crazily into space. However, as they came nearer, it was apparent that many of them were abandoned.

They passed through a long street and entered a building which Kueelo seemed to know well. He was familiar with everything here, Ric thought—too familiar! They came into a room where a man sat at a table, poring over charts and figures. He looked up, greeted Kueelo and Naric by name.

"This is Tal Horan, and the Princess Praana!" Kueelo said, the pride of accomplishment in his voice. "We have done better than we supposed! And this one is Ric Martin, who foolishly came into space to warn Dar Mihelson."

While Kueelo was telling his story, Ric watched this Phobian leader, Gorak, who was as ghastly a character as he had ever seen. Pallid, with a bluish tinge, the man

stood well over six feet tall, but his body seemed frail. His head was absurdly large, quite hairless and glistening. The colorless, lidless eyes were not nice to look into. He watched the others, especially Praana, with those cold eyes as Kueelo talked.

"So. The Princess Praana," Gorak said at last, and his thin gash of a mouth parted in a grin, revealing brownish teeth. "But are you quite sure, Kueelo? I seem to remember her differently, in the tele-magnum."

"I am quite sure, Gorak. It was Bedril's wish that she disguise herself."

Gorak nodded, never once taking those lidless orbs from Praana. "You have done well, Kueelo. She will serve as a most valuable pawn. And this other—Tal Horan. Is he not the metallurgist who worked with Bedril?"

"Yes, and I'm sure he must have their formula for the Counter-active! They were working in the right direction, just as we . . ."

Gorak held up a hand. He surveyed Tal Horan coldly from head to foot, and Tal returned the gaze unflinchingly. Then Gorak's gaze lingered on Tal's right hand. He spoke without emotion.

"Kueelo. You have not been very observant."

Tal Horan whirled for the door, but a dozen Phobians had entered silently to bar the way. Tal lashed out at them, and three went down before his pile-driver fists before the others brought him back, struggling, to stand before Gorak.

"It is useless, Tal Horan. You see, we need this formula." Gorak reached to Tal's right hand, removed a colorless, plastic ring from his finger. From the inside of the ring he stripped a tightly-rolled film, handed it to Kueelo.

"It is you who will need this, Kueelo. I am sure you can persuade Tal Horan to assist you in deciphering it."

"Think again!" Tal husked through clenched teeth.

Praana faced the Phobian leader squarely. "You beast! You'll never reclaim Mars from the red plague! And—my people are safe!" Triumph filtered into her voice.

Gorak grinned down at her. All of him grinned except those horrible eyes. He turned, touched the huge tele-magnum be-

hind him. "Let us say, rather, that your people have gained a temporary respite. They are safe on Earth's moon. I watched it." Sudden vicious hate erased the grin. "But my people remain too, Praana! For three hundred years the Phobians have hidden and burrowed and builded—and planned! The Martians thought they had wiped us out. They levelled our cities with atom-blasts, they slashed and blackened the surface of Phobos and hunted down my people mercilessly. Even when our Fleet had gone down to destruction and we were helpless, even when my people sued for a peace from the horrible war, *pleaded*, the Martian leaders would not listen!"

Praana was taut with emotion. "Yes! Yes, our history tells of it too! Three times the Phobians had initiated wars against Mars which ended in holocaust for both our peoples! And the last time, we determined it should never happen again. However," she gained control of herself, "this was long before your time or mine. Centuries ago."

"True. We are the fourth generation. It is personal, nevertheless! The Phobians as a race do not die easily . . . nor as individuals do they ever forget!" Gorak's lips writhed again. "It was for *me* to resume the war against Mars! I am destined to be our liberator, and I have done exceedingly well. Once more we are on equal terms, Praana!"

"You resumed the war!" Her face was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The spores, of course. The red plague that appeared so mysteriously on Mars. Where do you think it came from?"

Praana's face blanched. Tal Horan tired to leap forward, to smash Gorak's sneering face. But a dozen wiry Phobians held him back.

"Yes," Gorak went on. "The spores were launched from here! Almost single-handed, I have accomplished the destruction of Mars. The rest will be easy! We have far-reaching plans!" With a wave of the hand Gorak indicated that he was weary of this. "Take them away, Kueelo. See that Praana is made comfortable, but guard her well. If Tal Horan shows a disinclination to work with you on the Counter-active, refer him again to me, but I am sure you have persuasive methods equal to my own."

Gorak turned his cold orbs to Ric. "As

for the Earthman . . . watch him well! His lips have been very still, but not his brain!"

V

OUTSIDE again, Ric flashed a warning look at Tal Horan and said tentatively, to Kueelo:

"As a spaceman and engineer, all of this interests me! Just what is the nature of these spores? How did you manage to get them across to Mars? And"—he looked about the empty streets—"where are the Phobians?"

"You shall learn these things in due time. And, if you are entertaining thoughts of escaping from here," Kueelo said with calm assurance, "you may as well forget it. You will work, Earthman; you will work very hard, in order to stay alive. You'll soon learn why! Later . . . you may be of even more use to us."

They entered the car again and soon were speeding away from the city. The shimmering blue surface light began to fade away. They entered a twilight place where the walls were of dull gray stone.

"Where are you taking us now?" Praana asked.

"You shall see! I feel it is best that you understand fully what we have accomplished here, and it is only the beginning. Our plans are far-reaching!"

Far-reaching. Ric thought he knew what that meant, but he remained silent and watchful. A few miles further they entered a region of pallid, purplish vegetation. There were vast patches of it, acres wide, growing from the surface. And they saw the Phobians. Hundreds of these frail, pallid people were working listlessly into the growth, harvesting it, placing it in small fibroid carts to be hauled away.

"You asked about the nature of the spores," Kueelo said to Ric. "Touch it, then. I want you to see for yourself."

Ric examined it curiously. It grew in thick masses close to the stone, almost lichen-like. It was the strangest stuff he had ever seen. It seemed literally to crawl! Carefully he reached out a hand. A faint tingling, almost radioactive, went through his skin.

"Touch it with metal," Kueelo said.

Ric searched his pockets, found a small silver coin. Gingerly he extended it. When

the metal was yet a few inches from the fungoid growth, it seemed to be snatched from his fingers! The growth reached swiftly upward at it, and the metal dissolved away. For a three foot radius the growth turned from the pallid purple to blood red...seemed trying to tear itself from the stone. Ric could even feel a faint heat from it.

So this was Korak's weapon! This was the stuff he had launched, somehow, upon Mars. It was diabolic...and Ric could understand, now, how Mars had been devastated in a matter of weeks! Questions were pounding in his brain; but before he could speak, Kueelo was saying with supreme confidence:

"You wonder how we control it. We have only partially done that, by use of the new allotropic metal from Mercury. Under special processing in our atomic furnaces we have been able to strengthen the atomic structure of the Mercury metal, at least to the point where it will counter-act the spores temporarily. With that accomplished, it was a simple matter to propel them on robot-control across the short space to Mars."

"And upon landing there," Tal Horan's voice came fraught with hate, "the spores broke down the metal and were free to spread on Mars! It's diabolic!"

"Let us say, clever," Kueelo continued coldly. "And with the formula you have provided, I believe we can strengthen the atomic structure still more. We can increase our range. We shall have a weapon indeed!"

He dismissed the subject abruptly and turned to Ric. "Tal Horan will assist me tomorrow at the laboratories. *Your* work will be here. You are new, and can do the work of a hundred of these Phobians."

There was secret meaning, secret amusement in the words. Ric looked again at the Phobians moving slowly, automaton-like, listless and dull-eyed. He felt an awful foreboding as he wondered how long before he became like these shells of men...

THEY returned to the city where Kueelo assigned them to their quarters. They didn't lack for comfort, but Phobian guards, obviously not of the worker class, patrolled the corridors ceaselessly.

"Their plan is obvious!" Ric said when

they were alone. "Earth is to be next, unless it capitulates to their demands. And lord knows what those will be!"

"Yes." Praana was thoughtful. "I think Kueelo would have bargained with Mars, but Gorak wanted his revenge, the wholesale destruction of our people. And he probably figures it will be a good object lesson to Earth."

"They couldn't have picked a better time, with Earth divided on the question of the Mars refugees, and Wessell using the Fleet for his own political ambitions! Tal... you'll be working with Kueelo tomorrow. Pretend to co-operate, but slow them down if you can! Learn what their plans are. Find out how much time we have!"

Tal nodded. "We'll all have to keep our eyes and ears open. Our only chance is to get back to that spaceship."

"How? Even if we got past the guards, we could never find our way back to that airlock." Ric laughed bitterly. "Direction is meaningless in this crazy world!"

Then he was strangely silent, as his mind struggled on the threshold of an idea. There was something Kueelo had said, in his boastful mood, something Ric should have remembered. Something...

But Ric couldn't recall it now. Events had happened too swiftly. The more he tried to grasp the idea the more it eluded him. At last his weary mind gave it up, and he sank into a sleep of exhaustion.

He was awakened roughly and looked up to see Kueelo. Tal and Praana were already up, and some Phobian servants were bringing breakfast in to them.

"You won't find existence here too hard," Kueelo told them, "so long as you do as you're told. Eat your breakfast, then you, Tal Horan, will accompany me, and you, Ric Martin, will go with Naric to the spore-fields. As for Praana... Gorak wishes to confer further with her."

Tal Horan glanced at her anxiously, but Praana whispered, "It's all right, Tal, I can take care of myself; and I may be able to help!"

Ric accompanied Naric, and they reached the spore-fields where groups of Phobians were already beginning the day's work. Ric was given a leather hood that came over his head and around his neck, and soft leather gloves.

He went to work slowly, methodically,

following the example of the others. The roots of the growth, he found, were embedded deep. It clung tenaciously. And soon, even through his clothes, through the protecting gear, he could feel faint radiations at work on his skin.

Before an hour had passed, it began to take its toll of him. Sweat was in his eyes, but he did not mind that. Much worse, something seemed to be happening to his metabolism. His blood moved sluggishly in his veins, as a terrible impassivity gripped him. Almost it was as though essential salts within his body were being dissolved, to slow up cellular activity! Ric paused to stare around at the phosphorescent glow that clung about the place like a ghastly pall.

A GROUP of Phobians moved toward him, pushing one of the half-filled carts. Ric watched them dully, feeling only a desire to give up, to sink down into the lichen growth that came about his ankles. To move, even to think, was an effort. Then one of the Phobians came toward him.

"You are new," the man said without emotion. "To stand still is fatal. You must keep working, keep moving, if you want to last long."

"Thanks." With an effort Ric roused himself from his lethargy, and joined the group. He worked fast now. It was tiring work, and the sweat still poured from him, but he felt his brain gradually clearing, and the blood didn't pound so heavily at his temples. He knew well what Kueelo had meant when he said, "You will work very hard, Earthman...in order to stay alive."

"My name is Yarnith," said the Phobian who had first spoken, as he moved and worked beside Ric.

Ric didn't see what that mattered, and he made no reply.

"You are Earthian," the man went on. "I don't know how you came here, but you are strong, stronger than four of us. Stay with our group, Earthman!"

Ric looked at him, then, and at the others in the group. There were perhaps a dozen. They were frail and pallid, but somehow their eyes were not so vacant, there was not the gray look of death upon their faces.

"You've not been here so long as the others!" Ric ventured.

Yarnith's face twisted bitterly. "No. Once we worked in the city, at the laboratories, carrying on Gorak's great work. He has promised us much...expansion, and the respect of other worlds and the glory that once was ours. But I've seen our people sent here to the spore-fields in increasing numbers! It's a living death!"

Ric saw the others nod in agreement, as they listened to Yarnith. "How much longer will it be?" one of them grumbled. "I for one do not intend to stay here and become as these others!" He indicated the hundreds of Phobians moving listlessly about their work.

Ric's heart leaped. "You mean...you're planning an escape?"

But immediately he saw he was wrong. Yarnith looked at him in puzzlement. "Escape...how can that be? This is our world, and where could we go?"

Ric knew, then, that these people knew little of Gorak's plans. They were probably unaware of the secret airlock leading from their hollow world! Not for three generations had a Phobian set foot on the barren outer surface. Gorak was using them as pawns in his insatiable plan.

Again Ric looked about him. Their cart was half-filled now, and they were moving toward a group of rough stone buildings that apparently served as barracks. Yarnith whispered, "Be alert, Earthman!"

Ric was puzzled, but stayed with them. They rounded a corner of one of the buildings, out of sight of the other workers. Then Yarnith acted quickly. He burrowed deep into the cart, came up with a small leather pouch; then as the other Phobians gathered round, he portioned out the contents.

Ric thought he recognized the brownish stuff. The dread *eishn* stems, a powerful narcotic. He'd encountered it once on Venus.

"It helps," Yarnith explained. "It combats the fatigue, builds up a cellular resistance and re-activates the blood stream. But we don't have much of it here, and—"

One of the men gave a warning cry. Ric whirled, saw another group of Phobians appear around the corner of the building. Their dull eyes took on a glint as they saw the *eishn* stems. Some of the new-

comers carried crude knives. Then they were rushing forward, and Ric found himself battling beside Yarnith and the others, battling for his life.

He lashed out as two of the Phobians converged upon him. His fist caught one of them, the man's face lost contour and his frail body sailed backward. The other went down from a blow to the body. Then a dozen of them were upon him, hands tearing at his arms and throat, and Ric felt himself going down. He fought back, using fists and knees now. The dread lethargy of this place was gone from him. He was feeling the first joy of battle against odds.

Soon he was clear, using his Earth strength to advantage. He rolled aside as a knife flashed toward him, grazing his cheek. He gained his feet. Yarnith and the others were fighting against overwhelming odds. He saw Yarnith seize a fallen knife, and two Phobians went down with blood gushing from their throats.

The very silence lent an unreality. Ric was everywhere now, unleashing sledgehammer fists that cut a path through the attackers. He evaded the slashing knives, seized one of the Phobians and hurled him bodily.

Yarnith fought on by Ric's side, exulting, using the knife. The attacking group was falling back now. Panic seized them as they witnessed the Earthman's strength. Soon they were fleeing, leaving a half-dozen of their dead and dying on the ground.

Ric towered there, still feeling the fierce surge of blood that was a tonic to him. He heard Yarnith's exultant voice.

"That was a battle, Earthman! I'm glad you were with us. They'll kill to get a few of these *eishn* stems." It seemed not to matter to Yarnith that these were his own people. He extended the pouch, but Ric waved it away. Yarnith seemed puzzled, then shrugged, as the group went back to their work.

Disgust flooded Ric like a cold wave from the sea. These people were lost, struggling against a hopeless existence. They were little more than beasts, and the addiction to the *eishn* stems only hastened the inevitable. He could not even feel pity—and certainly he could expect no help from them.

HE returned to their quarters in the city, weary of body and mind. It was hours before the dread effect of the spores left him—but Ric was determined not to resort to the *eishn* stems. Praana and Tal Horan had returned, and they compared notes for the day.

"They've gone far," Tal said grimly, "much farther than I ever dreamed! They have an improved type of atomic furnace. They process and shape the new metal into bomb-casings for the spores; but they're using it for new rocket-tubes as well! According to Kueelo, it will give them tubes that are absolutely blast proof and triples efficiency in relation to fuel consumption. Already they've equipped two new spacers, and will have more of them ready in the event that Earth refuses the Phobian ultimatum."

Ric listened wearily, his mind trying to seize the problem. "What will the ultimatum be?"

"I learned that today," Praana said. "Gorak will demand full recognition of Phobos as a member of the Inner Planet Federation, with himself as supreme ruler of Mars once he reclaims it from the red plague."

"Earth Council will never agree!"

"I learned even more," Praana went on. "Dar Mihelson managed to reach Luna safely with all units! They are safe for the time being, deep within Tycho. And Ric... the balance of Earth's fleet has sided with your Earth Council, and against Wessell. Already a showdown battle is in the making!"

Ric groaned. "Just what Gorak wanted! It will give him the time he needs. Tal, how far have they gone?"

"Unfortunately, Kueelo's already deciphered our formula and it gives them the missing equation! You see, Bedril and I were working on a principle which meant stripping the outer sheathe of electrons from the new metal, without disrupting the atom itself—and the power generated would serve to counteract the spores. Here, in their new type of atomic furnace, they have the necessary heat and pressure to do that."

"What will it mean, then?" Ric's brows furrowed.

"Simply that, in a manner of speaking, they'll be able to control the spore action,

and they'll soon be able to launch the spore bombs all the way to Earth!"

Ric arose and paced the room angrily. He stepped to the outer door and peered along the corridor, but a group of guards hurried toward him with electros held in readiness. They had been instructed well. Ric turned and continued to pace the room.

"It will be at least a few days before they're ready," Tal said. "There's little I can do to slow them down, Ric—but my chance may come!"

Ric paused. Already an idea was growing apace within him. It was a desperate idea but they had to try something—anything! He said, "I think somewhere in this city there's a supply of *eishn* stems. I saw some of the workers using it today—maybe it's smuggled out to them occasionally. I want to get hold of some! All I can get! Praana, suppose you work on that. If you can, find out where the stuff's kept!"

VI

FOR RIC, the next few days were an anguish that surpassed the most refined torture. He worked long hours in the spore fields, doing the work of a hundred Phobians. One worked hard, in order to retain life and sanity; to remain long idle, out there was to die a slow death. As it was, the stuff was taking an insidious toll of him. At times he wondered why he bothered. But he drove himself on, hoping against hope.

Once he even partook of the *eishn* stems that Yarnith offered. The stuff was bitter, gum-like, and offered a soaring elation and a surcease from the terrible fatigue; but the after-effect was so depressive that he didn't try it again.

He stayed with Yarnith's little group, moving and working and fighting with them. The others became increasingly hostile, launching sporadic attacks—those who could rouse themselves from lethargy—in an effort to get some of the *eishn* stems. But soon even Yarnith's small supply was gone, divided among his group.

Still the fighting went on, for the sake of action and blood-lust. Each day men died. Each day Ric had to protect himself. He found himself taking a fierce joy in it, and he no longer looked upon these Phobi-

ans as men. They were mere beasts with the killer instinct.

Ric was becoming one of them.

Only one thing sustained him. After each day's work the Martian, Naric, came for him in the atomo-car and took him back to his quarters in the city. There at least he had the company of Praana and Tal Horan. He could bathe, and rest, and the meals weren't bad.

Tal Horan, in the meantime, was working hard with Kueelo and the others in the laboratories, at the atomic furnaces, at the forges. Kueelo seemed not to care how much Tal learned of their work. He was supremely confident.

And well he might be. Tal told Ric of it.

"I've seen the newly processed metal under test! It stands up indefinitely against the metal-devouring spores—and eventually it will be a complete counter-active against them. And the new rocket-tubes are frightening! I saw one of them in the testing block, subjected to internal blasts far greater than anything known. It seems almost resilient under stress!" Tal's face had gone pale as he talked. "Later they plan to equip an entire Fleet. If that time ever comes..."

Time began to lose all meaning for Ric. Days blended into a phantasmagoria of working and fighting... blood and madness. Already he was forgetting how he had come here. He cared even less. He was here to die, and he hoped it would be soon.

It was perhaps a week later that Kueelo came to them, after the days work. "Gorak wishes to see you. All of you!"

Tal and Praana were puzzled. In Ric, a spark struck home. He struggled to rouse himself. Gorak... what could he want with them now?

"TODAY," Gorak told them when they appeared in his quarters, "I spoke with the Earth Council. I gave them my ultimatum."

He paused, watching their amazement. Then he turned to the tele-magnum, a huge and magnificent instrument, as powerful as anything Earth had.

"I cut into the Earth beam while they were broadcasting to Venus and, by drowning out their channel, contacted them for a few minutes. Needless to say," he turned

his cold orbs upon Ric, "they refused my terms. They refuse to believe I destroyed Mars. Of course I realize it would be hard for them to capitulate even if they wanted to. Earth's Fleet is divided, and all has not gone well with Wessell. Already there have been skirmishes around Luna, and part of Wessell's fleet has gone down to destruction."

Ric's heart leaped. At least this was good news! But Gorak's cold voice went on.

"I cannot wait for them to destroy themselves, because in two more days Phobos comes into juxtaposition with Earth, and that will not happen again for months. Earth must have an object lesson! Come. I wish to show you what I mean."

Once again they entered the atomo-car and were speeding away from the city, traversing Phobos' inner shell. They passed the laboratories and shops, hearing the clangor of work still going on. They came to a place where huge, powerful-looking rockets were arranged in neat rows. There were literally hundreds of them.

"Those are the bombs!" Tal whispered to Ric. "They explode upon contact, releasing the spores!"

Their car had stopped, and Gorak ordered them out. Kueelo and Naric were there, and dozens of Phobians, fully armed. The place was well guarded. They saw vast mechanisms reaching endlessly across the wall. These were topped by huge metal discs, perhaps ten feet in diameter.

"The propulsion pits," Gorak explained. "Even vaster, of course, than those we used against Mars. I wanted you especially to see these—Ric Martin. Kueelo, show him."

Kueelo stepped to the operating board. Slowly, under his control, one of the huge discs slid back. A great, gleaming metal bore was revealed. It ejected toward them silently, as, though on great compression coils.

"The bores extend entirely through Phobos' shell," Gorak went on. "It has been the work of years. They rest on huge pivots and can be adjusted to any desired angle." He waved a hand. "As you can see, we have twenty of them. Let us hope we will not need them all. Luna is airless, and the action of the spores will be faster there than on Mars."

"Luna!" Praana swayed and would have collapsed, but for Tal Horan's arms about her. "You're going to land the spores on Earth's moon? My people are there . . . bottled up in Tycho!"

"That is unfortunate. Your people may yet be saved, Princess Praana. It depends upon Ric Martin."

"What do you mean?" Ric's voice was tight.

Gorak looked at him calculatingly. "You may have wondered why we have revealed everything to you—all of our plans, all of our power. It's because I want you, as an Earthman, to realize what's in store for your planet unless they capitulate. I don't want Earth to go the way of Mars. I don't even want to destroy Earth's moon—unless it's necessary. It's up to you, Ric Martin, to convince your stubborn Earth Council!"

"How can I do that?"

"Tomorrow evening Earth's regular news broadcast will be beamed to Venus. I can cut into the channel again, as I did today. This time *you* will speak to them. You will tell your Council what you have seen here, and what faces them. It will be their last chance! If you don't convince them . . . Luna's destruction will! Earth was aloof when Mars was dying, but this will be much nearer home!"

THE hours passed. A deadly quiet had come over the city, not even broken now by the monotonous hum of the atomic furnaces. It was "night"; their wall lights had automatically dimmed, but outside the bluish light from Phobos' walls was all-pervading.

Ric, Praana and Tal Horan did not sleep. But the guards outside had been doubled, and they were alert, patrolling the corridors ceaselessly. Occasionally one of the guards stopped to look in upon them.

"Your people will not die, Praana," Ric told her. "I'll convince the Council to do as Gorak says. Later, perhaps, they can find the way to deal with him."

"No! His first move would be to order the surrender of their entire Fleet. Earth would be relegated to a minor power . . . and Venus would be next!"

Tal said thoughtfully, "Ric . . . when you get in front of that tele-magnum, tell your Council to send their entire Fleet out

here! They ought to be able to blast Phobos out of space!"

"Yes, if they could get within ten thousand miles of here—which they can't! Gorak's bombs are radio-controlled, and the entire Fleet wouldn't stand long against them."

They were suddenly silent, as a Phobian guard appeared in the doorway. For a moment the man stood hesitant. Praana rose, quickly crossed the room to him. The guard handed something to her, and moved quickly away.

"The *eishn* stems!" Praana handed Ric several tightly wrapped bundles. "For days I've been trying to persuade him to get some for us! I convinced him we needed it for ourselves."

Ric had almost forgotten about it. "My plan may not work, now. But it's a last chance. If only they send me back to the spore-fields tomorrow!" He hid the drug carefully away in his clothes.

And Ric did go back to the fields. For him it was the same routine day. Those deadly spores needed harvesting, to go into the bombs that were still being assembled. He worked as usual, but stayed near the man Yarnith, awaiting his chance.

At last it came. He managed to get Yarnith apart from the others.

"I have something for you!" Ric reached into his pocket, brought out one of the *eishn* stems. Just one.

Yarnith seized it, placed it in his mouth. His hands trembled in eagerness, his dulling eyes came to life. "Earthman! where did you—I thought—"

"Yes, you thought there were no more of them! Yarnith, you are no longer men, you are slaves, all of you are slaves! Do you suppose Gorak cares about you? He and the others live in luxury in the city, while the rest of you work out here and die and kill—"

Yarnith wasn't listening, he had become as the others. He no longer cared. Ric looked at the man in disgust, then fury swept over him. He seized Yarnith's arm, whirled him around roughly. Yarnith cowered, whimpering.

"Listen to me! Listen! There are more *eishn* stems, enough for all of you. All you have to do is take them! Do you understand that?"

Yarnith understood that. It was all he

understood, all he cared. He nodded eagerly. "More of them?"

"Yes, in the city! Gorak has them!"

Yarnith slumped in despair. "The city. We can never go there again. None of us have ever—"

Ric shoved him away disgustedly, went to join the others. Throughout the day he moved among them, portioning out the stems, giving them the same story. Each worker received one stem, no more. Some were beyond understanding him, and these he tried to avoid. Others watched him covetously, eyeing the supply of stems he was portioning out.

Once a knife slashed his shoulder, and he went to his knees from the blow. Ric whirled and killed the man with a single blow that snapped the frail neck. Ric went berserk then, dashing among them, flailing and lashing and throwing fists left and right as the blood-lust came upon him. They fled before him.

"You're going to understand one thing, damn you!" he shouted. "There are plenty of these stems in the city, but you'll get them for yourself! I'll bring you no more!"

That seemed to work better. It roused them from their lethargy, and Ric kept them that way. How many more he killed or maimed, he never knew. It became a sort of mad game. It was a day Ric was never to forget!

Nor would they forget him. At the end of that day he saw many of them in groups, muttering to themselves, watching him balefully. As if for the first time, they realized one thing: this Earthman always returned to the city . . . and he had *eishn* stems!

When Ric returned this time, there was a weariness upon him such as he had never known. But a fierce hope burned within him, a hope that these Phobians would remember . . . that they'd become men again for at least a while, and not fall again into their lethargy . . .

He'd done his best, and there would not be another chance.

VII

KUEELO came to them, as they were at the evening meal. "Be ready, Ric Martin. The Earth broadcast will be in a few hours. Gorak is getting the tele-mag-

num ready now." He handed Ric a closely-written paper. "These are the things you will tell your Earth Council, and be sure you follow it to the letter!"

Ric scarcely looked at the paper. They waited nervously, as the minutes lengthened into hours, and Ric's thoughts whirled in chaos. To refuse Gorak's dictates now would mean death to Praana's people on Luna. On the other hand Ric knew that Earth would never capitulate! At the very best, it would mean holocaust and a spatial war such as the System had not known in two hundred years.

At last it was time. They were taken under special guard to Gorak's quarters, where the tele-magnum was ready. The next few minutes would determine the fate of two worlds, perhaps even the entire System!

Everyone was tense. Even Gorak's pallid features were pulled into tight lines, as he said to Ric, "When we've gained control of the Earth beam, you will announce yourself. Then you will read what is on the paper, and no more! If you depart from it in the slightest, I shall order my guards to blast you down." He turned to Praana. "When Ric Martin is through, you may make a plea to the Earth Council on behalf of your people."

Gorak turned to the tele-magnum, an instrument that dwarfed everything in the room. The control panel was taller than the man himself, connected to huge coils and tubes. He manipulated the controls with swift surety. The tubes came aglow, danced with silvery radiance.

The coils hummed a smooth threnody, then shrieked as they absorbed the increasing power. Soon the sound rose above the audible. Then...from far away, a faint voice was heard droning monotonously. This was the Earth beam, the scheduled news-broadcast to Venus. Gorak moved the dials swiftly, and the voice filtered through.

"...at last report, has been determined that the Martians under command of Dar Mihelson have maintained their temporary haven within crater Tycho. The eight-day Battle of Luna, it is expected, will be terminated shortly. An unconfirmed report says that Felix Wessell has been captured, and is being returned to Earth where he will face court-martial for high treason.

Another amazing development concerning the plague on Mars, is thought to be a hoax. Thirty hours ago—"

Gorak twisted the dials viciously, cutting off the voice. "A hoax! So they think my demands are a hoax!" Fury mastered him for a moment, then he went to work over the controls. "I'll cut into their beam. Be ready, Ric Martin! They'd better listen now!"

The voice came again, then was drowned out as Gorak's increased potential flooded the channel. Tal Horan, standing beside Ric, was suddenly tense. He gripped his arm and whispered, "Listen!"

But Ric had heard it too, they all heard it. From the streets outside, from far away, came an angry murmur—a *crowd* murmur, wafted to them through the night stillness. And it was coming nearer.

THEY saw Kueelo motion to several of the guards, and the men hurried outside. Still the sounds came, louder now, a sort of angry chant. Now it seemed to enter this street, to be heading this way.

Alarmed, Kueelo himself seized an electro and hurried out. Gorak still worked over the tele-magnum. He looked up in annoyance. Then he straightened.

"Very well, Ric Martin. I've established contact!"

Ric hesitated, then moved slowly to stand before the tele-sender. He moistened his lips, glanced at the paper in his hand. At that moment a guard came bursting back into the room. Blood streamed from his face.

"The workers! I—I think they've revolted!"

Gorak leaped to another instrument, pressed a row of buttons—six of them, lightning-fast. Then he was across the room, hurrying out the door.

"Ric Martin speaking!" Ric was shouting into the tele-sender. "Be alert for spore-bombs aimed at Luna!" He could not be sure it got across, but that was all he had time for. The remaining guards stood hesitant, started to follow Gorak, and then turned back.

But Tal Horan was leaping into action now. He met two of the guards before they could draw their weapons...sent them crashing across the room. Ric leaped to help him. An electro-beam slashed across

his shoulder, so close he could feel the swirling heat of it. The melee was furious but brief. The remaining guards were no match for the two men and Praana, who had seized a small ornamental vase from a table and was battering one of the guards to pulp.

Tal grabbed one of the electros and came to his feet. "We'll have to make a break for it! I know the way back to that outer air-lock!"

Outside, the Phobian workers were coming in a surging resolute mob. There were hundreds of them. On the far side of the street were Gorak and Kueelo and a few of the guards. Gorak was harranguing the advancing mob, but it was useless. Then they saw him give an order...and the guards began opening up with the electros.

"To the right!" Tal said. "We've got to get past that mob. Stay on this side!"

With Tal leading the way, they sprinted toward the advancing Phobians, staying in the shadow of the walls. The electros were taking effect now. The odor of burning flesh arose.

But there was no stemming that tide. The mob raced forward, yelling, as those behind pressed on. Ric's work at the fields that day had roused them, all right—perhaps too well! They found themselves being carried forward in the mob.

A few crazed Phobians swerved from their path to leap at the little party. Tal and Praana had no choice but to bring their electros into play. Ric swung one foolhardy Phobian high over his head and dashed him back among his fellows.

"This way!" Tal hurried to a small building, blasted the lock with his electro. Inside were a score of the three-wheeled, atom powered cars. Minutes later they were speeding away from the city, heading for the outer air-lock of Phobos.

They reached the place, and Tal worked over the mechanism until huge metal doors rolled away. They saw the ship that had brought them here, the Unit Twenty-Six of the Martian *Valiant*. But they had no eyes for it now. Several of Gorak's own spacers were there, those with the new-type rocket tubes which Tal had mentioned.

"Tal!" An idea was building up in Ric's mind. "Remember what Kueelo said about their power plant, anchored in the center of

Phobos? He said it was reverse gravity, expanding *outward*! What would happen if we drove a spaceship straight into it?"

For a moment they looked at each other in delighted silence.

"About three hundred miles," Tal said, looking at the gray-blue distances of the hollow world. "And Unit Twenty-Six, here, has a supply of atomo-bombs! We'll have to ride it out there, and then get back before the explosion...it will take perfect timing...but it can be done!"

FEVERISHLY they went to work. First they maneuvered one of Gorak's smaller but speedier ships alongside the Mars spacer, anchored it there with magnetic plates which could be thrown on or off in a split second. But it pointed in a reverse direction, with its prow toward the larger ship's stern. Tal Horan looked to the fuel tanks, gave all the rockets experimental blasts to be sure the feed lines were working. At last all was in readiness.

Tal Horan faced Praana. "Wait here in one of the other ships. Don't be nervous. Watch for the explosion. You'll be able to see it. The moment you do, get these rockets warmed up and ready!"

She nodded, but her face had gone pale. Suddenly she choked up. "Tal, is—is it necessary?"

"It has to be done. This is the quickest and surest way! Don't worry," he took her hands in his. "We'll get back, I promise you!"

Quickly he turned away and entered the larger ship where Ric was waiting.

"You're a spaceman, Ric; I'm not. You take the controls."

Ric nodded grimly. Slowly he threw over the rocket-feed control. Yes, he was a spaceman. He'd handled all types of ships under all conditions, but he knew he'd have to call on every bit of his training now! The rockets throbbed to life. Gradually the ship dragged out of the lock, across the vast ledge toward the inner space. Ric increased the power...then they were free of the planet's shell and heading toward the center of Phobos!

The mass of the smaller ship anchored to them made the controls unwieldy, but Ric was ready for that. What bothered him was that they were fighting gravity all the way—a gravity that *spread outward* to-

ward them! The result was the same as a blast-off from a gravity equal to that of Mars! But there were other conditions that were not the same.

Tal Horan looked to the magni-plate controls that held the smaller ship to them. He tightened the power a little and then came to stand by Ric's side.

"About how long would you say?"

"We should be able to sight it in ten or fifteen minutes," Ric never took his eyes from the view-finder. "At least I don't want to accelerate until then. We'll need full power for the final drive."

The space around them now was tinged with the gray-blue light, but it was thick and murky, as though they were driving beneath the waters of a sea.

"Suppose we don't sight the gravity station. If we miss it altogether..."

"We're not heading blind," Ric nodded toward an indicator above his head. "That magni-finder will indicate the direction of any mass larger than ourselves, and then I can center our course. I'm just wondering if the atomo-bombs will be enough!"

"They will!" Tal assured him. "The principle of this gravity-station is electronic. It's been here at the center of Phobos for three hundred years without a breakdown...but once our bombs start the disruption, the explosion will be like nothing you've ever seen!"

Ric straightened suddenly. The magni-finder had come to life—was indicating a position a few degrees to starboard. He altered direction until the needle centered, and held the controls there. His eyes sought the proximity indicator.

"Heading at it now. Fifty miles! What do you think?"

"We can go closer," Tal said. Ric didn't question him; he was a spaceteer, but Tal was the electronic expert.

Tal Horan was peering intently ahead, now, and he exclaimed, "There it is! I can just make it out!"

Through the glaucous haze they could barely make out a spherical shape, hanging stationary, with a faint aura around it lending to the ghostly appearance. It must have encompassed miles, for even at this distance it was looming larger by the minute.

"Close enough," Tal announced at last. "We'd better get ready to trans-ship!"

THEY worked fast. Ric sighted the controls to pin-point precision, then locked them into place. Tal Horan was standing ready at the inter-lock by which they would trans-ship to the smaller spacer.

Ric gave a last look at the controls... then threw them over to full blast. He sprang through the lock, as the ship leaped ahead like a monster unleashed. With a sweep of the band Tal released the magni-plates, and was leaping after him. It was close! Their smaller ship was sent spinning free, end over end, "falling" back toward Phobos' shell.

Ric crashed against a wall, was dazed for a moment. He managed to drag himself forward to the controls. He groped blindly, was able to throw on the rocket power which served to stabilize them somewhat. He dragged himself upright, then, and realized that the worst was yet to come.

If that explosion reached them!... They must keep ahead of it at all costs. Ric opened the rockets wide, and gasped at the surge of power. These new rockets were blast-proof indeed!

Tal was at the stern ports now, watching the larger ship driving away from them. Soon it had vanished into the gray-blue distance. The explosion would be soon...

Minutes passed. Then it came. They saw it first, a blinding flash of light that seemed to encompass all of space within Phobos' shell! But it would be more minutes before they felt the actual concussion. They were speeding away recklessly, speeding *with* gravity now! And before Ric quite realized it, they were nearing the outer shell again and he had to break speed.

Then his heart sank within him. Due to that wild spin, he had lost direction! The huge air-lock, where Praana waited, was nowhere in sight.

Precious seconds passed, as Ric brought the spacer skimming the inside of the shell like a pebble inside a bottle! Panic gripped him. This would be the end, if they didn't find that air-lock! It was the only passage to outer space. When the full concussion reached this shell, it would flatten them!

He heard Tal shouting in his ear. "The city! There's the city!" He was gesturing frantically, far to the left. Ric headed for it recklessly and swept over the city at breakneck speed. The lock should be somewhere a few miles beyond...

Then they saw it. They glimpsed tiny pin-points of fire as Praana blasted the rockets of her ship as a signal to them. Ric braked with the forward tubes. As it was, he came into the wall with a crashing glide that sheared half of the under-hull away.

They climbed out, raced for the lock just as the first wave of onrushing air threatened to sweep them up. It became a hurricane. The full concussion would be right behind it!

Praana was waiting and ready. They piled into the ship and without a waste motion Ric was at the controls. They swept deeper into the lock...into darkness. Unbearable heat enveloped them. Already they were feeling the concussion! There came a moment of giddy acceleration, an unbearable pressure that sent the blood pounding in their ears.

Then a pattern of starlight swept across their vision. Sharp crags loomed suddenly ahead...they passed over them, a wild terrain dropped sheerly away, and their spacer became a fiery pinwheel of rocket blasts as they were hurled into free space!

RIC WAS fighting the controls, fighting the unbelievable pressure that threatened to black him out. He caught a glimpse of Phobos behind them, bursting apart in a blinding holocaust. Gradually, with alternate rocket thrusts, he managed to stop their wild spin. Then, dazedly, they turned to look.

The scene behind them now was like something on a slow-motion film. Almost lazily Phobos was expanding, as a ghastly bluish radiance enveloped the area. Then Ric came alert, as spinning, disintegrating fragments larger than their ship began hurling about them.

He blasted away, and minutes later they were looking back at the deadly area. Only a vast powdery haze occupied the former orbit of Phobos. Soon even this haze would disappear as the infinitesimal particles drew together. A few larger fragments were falling toward Mars now, where doubtless they would take up individual orbits about the planet.

Ric set his course, and on full rocket blast they headed for Earth. Tal was worried, as he scanned the visi-panel.

"Ric...just before Gorak rushed out of the room...when he touched that row of buttons..."

"Yes, I know. I'm sure that released the bombs. He already had the sights set for Luna!"

Hours later Earth came into view, became rapidly larger in their visi-panel. They could see Luna, far to the left. And a moment later, part of Earth's Fleet was seen blasting out to meet them. A voice stabbed through their radio.

"Hello, hello! Commander Graham of Patrol ship *Terra* speaking. 'We've had you in our magniview for the past ten minutes. As you carry no insignia, you will go into a drift immediately and announce yourself!'"

Ric did so gladly. Then, briefly, he explained what had happened. He chuckled as the Commander's amazed voice came back to him.

"We observed the disruption of Phobos! You came from there? What about those spore-bombs?"

"They're on the way! You've sighted none of them yet?"

"No. We've been watching..."

Praana spoke into the sender, anxiously. "What about my people? Dar Mihelson, and the others—"

"They're safe. The Battle of Luna is over, and already the Martians have transhipped to Earth. We're patrolling the dark side of Luna. If we sight the bombs, we can deflect them from their course, send them into a free orbit and destroy them at our leisure."

"No!" Ric said. "They may land on Earth if you try that. Send a flash to your patrol not to touch those bombs, but get away from there fast. Take my word, it's urgent!"

He received the Commander's assurance, and the televiser blanked out.

"It's better to let Luna go," Ric said to Tal, "than to place Earth in danger. We can reclaim it later—Mars, too—now that you have the counter-active."

Tal nodded. There would be work, long and hard and dangerous. There would be problems. He and Praana stood arm in arm at the visi-panel, watching eagerly as the welcome panorama of Earth spread out below.



I jumped into the ship and sealed the port.

THE VENUS EVIL

By Chester S. Geier

In the sweet Venusian spring, when iridescent butterflies swarmed and deer-things scampered, it was both necessary and good for Richard Farris to kill George Pearce.

IN MY MIND the memory is still painful and raw, like a wound that has refused to heal. I have only to close my eyes to see Pearce leaping toward me, his face a twisted mask of fear and rage.

And I can feel the machine-pistol jerking in my hand as a stream of tungsten-steel pellets stopped his maddened rush, washing away all motion and expression in the utter quiescence of death.

Yes, I killed George Pearce, whom the world will remember as one of its greatest chemical scientists and one of the three members of the ill-fated first expedition to Venus. I *had* to kill him.

To explain the circumstances which led to it requires that I start at the beginning. Police authorities have ordered me to make this statement as clear and detailed as possible.

Everyone recalls the furor created by the privately sponsored launching of the first rocket to Mars, which beat by several months a government project aimed at the same goal. The government rocket blew up a short distance beyond the Heaviside Layer, but a little over a year and a half later the privately-owned space vessel returned. And a new furor was aroused, not so much by the fact that the expedition had successfully returned as that it brought back a large fortune in gold, platinum, and gems. The explorers as well as their backers were each made financially independent for the rest of their lives.

Man's natural cupidity was excited to fever pitch. The planets were no longer regarded as milestones on the road to scientific knowledge, but as store houses brimming with fabulous treasures. More rockets were hastily launched by various groups in different countries, but the attempts were defeated by the very impatience which inspired them. The rockets, too quickly and inefficiently constructed, exploded soon after leaving Earth, or, if they reached outer space at all, were never heard from again.

It was this state of affairs that prevailed when Anson Durwent finished the construction of the *Solarian*. A scientific genius made wealthy by various patents, he built the vessel entirely out of his own funds. Nor were his motives those of amassing further wealth, for the conditions which he set were that the *Solarian* was to conduct a true voyage of exploration, and that any profits arising from the discovery of precious metals or minerals were to be divided equally among everyone involved in the expedition.

The crew of the *Solarian* consisted of George Pearce, Barton Sandley, and myself, Richard Farris. Three or less was the usual number on these early rockets, due to the demands upon space made by

fuel, food, and equipment. Pearce was the chemist and captain of the expedition, Sandley the biologist and photographer, and I the physicist and pilot.

None of the excitement produced by interplanetary ventures was attendant upon our takeoff. Only a few newscasters whom Durwent had notified at the very last minute were present. And these were bored by something which had become mere routine, and were plainly skeptical of our chances for success.

Our objective was the mysterious, cloud-covered planet Venus. It was an obvious choice, since it was the nearest planet to Earth other than Mars, and as far as we knew had not yet been reached.

I SHALL NOT DETAIL the long flight through space, monotonous after the first novelties had died. But it is necessary to record that the interminable months and the restricted confines of the ship produced a strain upon our nerves that led to frequent, heated quarrels over the most trivial matters. It is certain that the effect upon our minds caused a serious unbalance, explaining many of the irrational actions which we made later.

The landing upon the surface of Venus was the most difficult part of the voyage. I brought the ship down through the miles-deep layer of clouds like a blind man groping for obstructions in an unfamiliar room. Once under the clouds, however, our progress was easier. I forgot my exhaustion in a surge of renewed eagerness for exploration.

After a short discussion between Pearce, Sandley, and myself, it was agreed to take an aerial reconnaissance before landing. I sent the *Solarian* into a slow cruise over the surface, while Sandley busied himself with the special cameras and Pearce began taking samples of the atmosphere.

Venus proved to be a wild and fantastic world. To picture it in any great detail is impossible. It was too vast, too different. My mind retains only a sort of montage of turbulent seas dotted with immense islands, mighty jagged mountains, and endless lush sprawling jungles in unearthly yellow and green hues. And it seemed to exude an aura of vibrant youth, a kind of primeval grandeur.

We saw no cities, buildings, or other

indications of the existence of intelligent beings. I don't believe we expected to find any. On Mars there had been only incalculably ancient ruins, long since crumbled into dust. Mars had been too old for a civilized race, as Venus was too young.

Our survey quickly showed that an island on one part of the planet was as wild and rugged as an island on another, so that a landing site could be chosen haphazardly for all the difference it made. We selected a relatively clear area in a great valley on one of the islands that happened to be under us at the time, and I brought the *Solarian* to rest. Only then did I realize how tired I was.

Pearce, rechecking his initial tests of the atmosphere, reported that the carbon dioxide content was not as high as had been expected. We would be able to venture from the ship without the necessity of wearing oxygen helmets. The lighter gravity of Venus, lessening muscular effort and thereby the need for deep or quick breathing, would be an aiding factor.

We didn't leave the ship immediately, however. Like myself, Pearce and Sandley had become aware upon landing of being exhausted, and it was agreed to sleep first. Later we ate, and then arming ourselves with machine-pistols and various pieces of scientific equipment, we unsealed the port and stepped out upon the surface of Venus.

It was warm and humid, but not oppressively so. The air seemed strangely heavy to our lungs, laden with a host of rich, exotic odors. There was a deep, somnolent quiet, broken at intervals by faint pipings and twitterings from unseen creatures that might have been birds. A warm, soft wind stirred the vivid foliage of queer trees and shrubs at the edges of the clearing.

Sandley murmured, "Not bad at all. Eden must have been a little like this."

Pearce shrugged. "Maybe—but we'd better keep in mind that this is a strange world. There may be dangers here of which we know nothing as yet."

With this admonition prominent in our thoughts, we got to work, setting up our equipment, analyzing samples and making notes. The days that followed were more or less a repetition of this. We were constantly on the alert at first and seldom

wandered very far from the ship. But as we encountered no inimical life-forms, either plant or animal, we were gradually encouraged to roam further and further beyond the clearing.

SANDLEY was busy with his camera, when not otherwise occupied with biological studies. He was often gone for hours at a time. I was thrown much in Pearce's company, since my work was frequently connected in various ways with his.

"I wonder if we'll turn up anything, like they did on the Mars expedition," Pearce said one day, gazing about him with a narrow, speculative look.

I asked, "How do you mean?"

"Stuff that will bring money back on Earth," Pearce said. "Gold, for example."

For some reason which I couldn't explain just then, I found myself clutching eagerly at the thought. "It's possible," I said. "We've hardly scratched the surface as yet."

Pearce gazed searchingly at me for a moment. Finally he asked, "What was your motive for accompanying this expedition, Farris? To advance the cause of science? Or what?"

"Why . . . to get some profit out of it." The reason which had puzzled me was suddenly clear. I recalled abruptly the hopes and dreams I'd had, overlooked in the wonders of exploration.

Pearce nodded. "Exactly. And the same applies to me." His tone became bitter. "Being famous in your chosen line of work is nice, but it doesn't buy you much. At least, it doesn't buy the things that really matter. Newscast blurbs, banquet invitations, and honorary memberships hardly provide the fancy style of living they suggest. Awards and prizes are too small and too far between to build a complete, private laboratory."

I said, "And that's what you want?"

"That's what I intend to get, somehow," Pearce said. He studied me again. "What about you, Farris? What's your ambition?"

"Financial independence, mainly. There are certain ideas that I'd like to work on. I'd never get the time or the money while earning a living as assistant to a man like Durwent."

"Then this might be the chance we both need. If we could turn up something

valuable, like the Mars explorers did . . ." Pearce nibbled his lip, frowning intently over the thought. Abruptly he grabbed my arm. "Parris, we've got to find something! Look—suppose we forget the scientific side of the expedition? Suppose we make it an outright treasure hunt?"

"Venus is big," I said doubtfully. "And our supplies won't last forever. If we fail to find anything, the scientific data we'd gather would give us something to capitalize on."

We didn't discuss the matter further, for just then Sandley returned from one of his photographing jaunts. He seemed greatly excited.

"Just discovered a new form of life," he announced triumphantly. "Saw the creatures at a distance, but from what I was able to make out, they look something like overgrown butterflies. Had large, brightly colored wings, anyway. Have to catch a specimen." Sandley's spectacled, owlish features turned puzzled. "Can't understand why I haven't noticed the creatures before. Seem to have appeared only recently."

"Where were you?" Pearce asked.

"Near the upper end of the valley. It's rocky there, with lots of ore outcroppings. Might contain valuable elements. You fellows ought to go with me next time."

"We'll do that," Pearce said. He glanced at me significantly.

We went with Sandley the following day. We took along our machine-pistols, a few pieces of light equipment, and some food. Sandley, of course, had his camera. It was the first time that Pearce and I had gone any great distance from the ship, and we were more than ordinarily uneasy. But the possibility that we might discover ores or minerals of value was too tempting to resist.

We moved through a deep quiet, broken only by occasional twitters or trills. We caught frequent glimpses of the creatures emitting the sounds as they fluttered among the branches of the vivid, unearthly trees. They resembled birds in a way, having feathered wings, but their bodies were lizard-like and covered with bright, rainbow-hued scales. And several times animals bounded from our path that looked like nothing so much as tiny deer. These seemed to be quite numerous.

The vegetation gradually thinned out as the ground became increasingly rocky. Ahead of us loomed the rugged, precipitous ascent of the valley's upper end.

Sandley stopped, peering about him. "This is the place." Abruptly he pointed. "There—the butterfly-creatures! See them?"

Pearce and I followed the direction of his finger. Against the mottled gray wall of the ascent, a number of bright shapes fluttered. As we watched, they drifted slowly toward us, circling aimlessly. We were able presently to see them in clearer detail. I stared as a realization of something strange struck into me. I heard Pearce gasp.

For the butterfly-creatures were not insects, or anything even remotely resembling them. Nor were they a strange form of animal life. They were *things*, utterly alien and weird.

IMAGINE large, irregularly-shaped pieces of thin paper fluttering through the air, each being creased in the middle, the two halves flapping like the wings of a butterfly. The things were remarkably like that. But they were alive in some incredible way, and their actions seemed purposeful, directed. They looked delicate and fragile, almost unsubstantial, mere veils of prismatic light. And they possessed a bizarre, unearthly beauty. As they circled high overhead, occasionally dipping toward us in what might have been curiosity, their wings shimmered and pulsed in a hypnotic play of rainbow color.

The butterfly-creatures—to call them that for want of a better name—did not come near us. They continued to spiral high overhead, as though we at once attracted and puzzled them.

Sandley unlimbered his camera and began taking pictures of the things. Pearce and I, recalling the motive that had brought us there, gradually moved away, searching the ground for promising bits of rock and crystal. We were intent on our quest, and wandered quite a distance. Before long, we found ourselves among the tumbled boulders at the foot of the ascent.

As I searched the rocky debris between the boulders, a reddish glitter caught my eye. It came from a small crystalline object half hidden in the gravel. I bent

curiously to pick it up—and a thrill of incredulous delight flashed through me. For the object was a great jewel, roughly oval, faceted, and a deep ruby red. It was exquisitely beautiful, yet totally unlike anything that had ever been found on Earth. It did not just reflect light, but glowed with a soft, steady radiance of its own. Glorious rose and scarlet shades pulsed and swirled within it, in a never-ending play of patterns and hues that was fascinating to watch.

I held the gem in my hand for a long moment, staring at it, a little numbed. My find seemed much too good to be true. It was almost as if a kindly god had granted a hopeless wish.

I thought suddenly of Pearce, and motion returned to me. Pearce had moved some distance up the ascent. It took a moment to locate him behind the boulders which had hidden him from view.

Pearce was bending over in an intent scrutiny of the ground. As he caught the sound of my approach, he straightened sharply and one of his hands flashed behind his back as though to hide something from view. I was too wrapped up in the news of my discovery, however, to pay much attention to his actions just then.

"Look at what I've found," I told him, holding out the gem in my palm.

Pearce failed to look surprised. He grinned in an embarrassed sort of way, and brought his hand from behind his back. Cupped within it were two gems similar to mine.

"Found a couple myself," he said. "I was so excited that I must have forgotten where I was. When I heard you coming, my first thought was to hide them."

It seemed a strangely weak explanation. I realized that Pearce's consuming desire for financial gain had warped his sense of ethics. His action of a moment before had been nothing more or less than a conscious, deliberate effort to conceal his find. He had abandoned secrecy only after he knew that I had made an identical discovery. I made a mental note to be on guard. Pearce had given sufficient indication that he would not play entirely fair in the future.

He grinned eagerly in what might have been an attempt to cover up the awkwardness of the situation. "Farris, these gems

are going to bring money back on Earth. They're unusual, not like the ordinary kinds brought back by the Mars explorers."

I shrugged. "The money won't be enough to do us much good unless we can find more of the gems. Remember, any profits we make have to be split four ways, counting Sandley and Durwent."

"I'm certain that we'll find more," Pearce said. "I've found two, and you one. If that's any indication, there should be a lot of them scattered around. Come on, Farris, let's look."

I nodded in renewed eagerness, and we began the search. A disinterested observer might have found our actions comical as we probed with anxious, almost frantic, haste among the boulders. It didn't seem funny to us, of course. We had speculated more or less constantly during the entire voyage over the possibility of locating a source of wealth on Venus, and this was our chance. No, it wasn't funny at all. It was very real, and clear, and logical.

I don't know how much time passed. I was too absorbed in my search to pay much heed to anything else.

At intervals, I found three more gems. Each find came at a point when I was about ready to give up, spurring me on to new efforts. I might have continued indefinitely if Pearce hadn't suddenly called my name.

His voice was tense, insistent. Something important seemed to have happened.

WHEN I rejoined Pearce, he pointed silently down the ascent, in the direction from which we had come. His features were startled, bewildered, a little frightened. My own face must have registered similar feelings at what I saw.

Beyond the boulders at the foot of the ascent, one of the tiny deer-like animals that we frequently saw lay sprawled on the ground. Several butterfly-creatures rested motionlessly upon its body. A short distance away stood another of the deer-like animals, literally surrounded by the butterfly things. It was as still as though frozen, its great eyes distended and staring. And the wings of the butterfly-creatures hovering about it were moving in a slow, hypnotic rhythm. I thought of the snakes of Earth which captured birds

by charming them through similar movements, and realized that somewhat the same thing was happening here.

As I watched, the deer-like animal abruptly fell on its side and lay without moving. Like vultures swooping down on a victim, the butterfly things settled upon it. They seemed in some obscure way to be . . . *feeding*.

I glanced in consternation at Pearce. "What do you suppose it's all about?"

He moved his shoulders uneasily. "I don't know any more than you do. But I think we'd better look into this. And it might not be wise to let those things get too close."

Presently, the butterfly-creatures rose once more into the air and fluttered away. The deer-like animals, though, lay very still.

Pearce gestured, and I followed him to the scene. Only a short examination of the two deer-like animals was necessary to show what had happened to them. They were dead. There wasn't so much as a mark upon the sleek skin of their bodies—but they were dead.

Pearce and I stared at each other. And then a chilling thought struck me.

"Sandley!" I gasped. "We haven't heard anything from him for hours. Do you suppose . . . ?"

Pearce didn't answer. He turned and began running toward where we had last seen Sandley. I hurried after him, anxiety a sick ache inside me.

Slipping and sliding over loose rocks and gravel, we at last emerged from behind the line of tumbled boulders and reached level ground. We didn't see Sandley at once. He had obviously moved from where we had left him. Then I noticed a small cloud of butterfly-creatures hovering over something on the ground about a hundred yards or so down the boulder line. An outstretched leg, all that was visible to us from where we stood, provided identification. It was Sandley.

Heedless of danger, Pearce and I rushed forward. When we reached Sandley, the last of what must originally have been a horde of butterfly-creatures was leaving his motionless form. We were too late. Our terrible knowledge hadn't come soon enough.

In an abrupt, overwhelming fury, I

pointed my machine-pistol at the fluttering demons and sent a stream of pellets into their midst. The force of the barrage would have cut a man in two, but the things didn't seem to be affected in the slightest way. The pellets went through them as though they were no more solid than shadows.

THE THINGS made no move toward Pearce and myself, but continued to circle aimlessly overhead. They seemed too sated from whatever ghastly feast they had made upon Sandley to be interested in us just then. Having made certain of this, Pearce and I performed a quick examination of Sandley, which confirmed what we already knew—that he was dead. And there wasn't a mark upon him.

Keeping a close watch upon the butterfly things, Pearce and I gave Sandley a hasty burial. Then I wrapped his belongings in my shirt, and together Pearce and I ran back to the ship. It wasn't until the port had been shut behind us that I felt safe.

I prepared a light meal, which Pearce and I ate in brooding silence. Finally Pearce said, "What I can't understand is why the butterfly things should have attacked Sandley. It isn't logical for the life forms of one world to prey upon the life forms of another. There are too many differences."

"I've been thinking about that myself," I answered. "The solution seems to be that the butterfly-creatures feed upon something common to all life forms—the mysterious electrical force that gives matter the peculiar property of being alive."

Pearce shrugged, and after a moment his face brightened. "Anyway, we now have one less to divide with." He reached into a pocket, placing upon the table seven of the large crimson gems. I added the four that I had found, and for some seconds we gazed dreamily at our hoard.

"People on Earth are going to fight like mad to own one of these gems," Pearce said softly. "By selling the gems slowly, playing one buyer against another, our profits will be plenty big."

I nodded. "It won't make us very popular, but the end justifies the means."

"I wish we had some means of protection against those butterfly things, so that we could look for more of the gems,"

Pearce said. "They're dangerous, and we don't seem to be able to harm them."

"We could move the ship over to the ascent," I suggested. "Then it would be near enough for us to jump in whenever any of the things got too close."

Pearce grinned in delight. "That's the answer!"

I moved the ship the next day. The stratagem worked satisfactorily enough, enabling us to find almost a dozen more of the crimson jewels. But the need for constant watchfulness proved to be an increasing strain upon our nerves. And the number of the butterfly-creatures seemed to be growing. It seemed to be a season for the things, as late Spring brings the appearance of butterflies on Earth.

At last our treasure hunt became too dangerous to continue. The butterfly-creatures were too numerous, and in addition the gems had grown too hard to find. Pearce and I decided on one last trip, and this on his own argumentative insistence.

It was during that final search that I made the discovery which led to Pearce's death. I'd been probing among the rocks for an hour or so, meanwhile keeping a wary eye upon a group of butterfly-creatures circling in the sky some distance away. Suddenly I detected the telltale, reddish glitter of a gem. As I reached for it, a thin, tinkling sound startled me. I jerked erect, my senses flaring in alarm. But I saw nothing near me that indicated danger, and reached once more for the gem.

THE next instant I leaped frantically to my feet and ran into the ship, which rested nearby. I slammed shut the port, and leaned against it, breathing harshly from my exertions and from fright at the narrowness of my escape. Like the pieces of a puzzle falling together, something became horribly clear to me. And I knew suddenly just what I had to do.

From the box in which Pearce and I had kept them, I took the gems. Then I left the ship, first having made certain that none of the butterfly-creatures were near, and with a large rock pounded each and every one of the gems to bits.

I was finishing this task when Pearce returned. He stared at me and asked:

"Why, what in the world have you been doing?"

I pulled my machine-pistol from its holster, pointed it at him, and explained. I couldn't have taken any chances with Pearce. I knew what his reaction would be. I wasn't wrong.

He seemed to go mad. His face darkened with a terrible, overwhelming fury. "Lies! All lies!" he shrieked. "It's just a plot to trick me out of my share."

I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen to me. He shouted down my attempts with unspeakable profanity. My machine-pistol was the only thing that kept him from tearing at me like an insensate beast.

I was trying to get Pearce to calm down when several butterfly-creatures suddenly darted toward us. They had evidently been circling nearer and nearer while we talked, seizing the opportunity presented by our inattention.

My eyes jerked to the things instinctively—and as I did so, Pearce leaped toward me. In pure reaction, I squeezed the trigger. The stream of tungsten-steel pellets stopped him like a wall. Even if I'd had the time to deliberate consciously over whether or not to shoot, it wouldn't have ended any other way. For if Pearce had reached me, a struggle would have followed which would have enabled the butterfly-creatures to attack us.

Just an instant ahead of the butterfly-creatures, I jumped into the ship and sealed the port. After resting for a while, I set out on the return to Earth.

I told the authorities my story in full, holding nothing back. They asked me to make this statement for their official records. There are, of course, no charges against me. I should not have admitted to killing Pearce had I been guilty of a crime. But I fear that the shadow of suspicion will lay over me until another expedition returns from Venus and verifies my words.

And in late Spring, when the cocoons open and the butterflies emerge, I will always think of a similar season on Venus, when a similar event occurs. When the crimson gems break open with a thin, tinkling sound, and the exquisite, deadly butterfly-creatures flutter forth . . .

The Little Pets of Arkkhan

BY VASELEOS GARSON

Lovable little balls of fur, incongruous on this bleak asteroid, forlorn and lonely . . . who could be blamed for picking one up to take along—or for what happened thereafter?

AT FIRST, it was only a spider thread of sound. It was so soft, so caressing that it was like some healing unguent to the throbbing, burning boil that was Kent Knight's brain.

Tender and soothing as a wind-wafted melody in the first hush of evening, his grateful mind whispered. Then his mind was screaming as the spider thread grew jagged edges that clawed open the first pain wounds and tore them wider.

Knight lay on the hot rocky plain of the asteroid, sprawling convulsively where

he was thrown when the first sharp hurt slashed at his mind.

And it was such a lovely little beastie. All furry and round and soft. What awful power did it hold? I just touched it. Like an Earthly kitten, a little furry butterball. I should have known better, but it was like being on Earth again.

That faint wondering thought whispered through the pain. But it was flung from him as his pain-frantic brain raged at his nerves, knotted and twisted his muscles.

There was too much agony for his mind



"Look out!" Knight called. But the thing was quicker than Mallory.

to absorb. Knight sensed the waning of his mind's last resources with relief. The mental shocks ceased, his nerves and muscles quieted, and he drifted into a gentle darkness where there was no pain . . .

. . . *It's gone*, his mind observed gleefully. The thankful knowledge that wakefulness did not bring renewed pain smothered the *other thing*. But only for a moment.

Kent Knight. I am Kent Knight, I must remember that. I mustn't forget it. I mustn't let It make me forget. I am a man. My shipmates and I crashed on this asteroid in the Star Climber.

The *other thing* laughed at him—in him. The wee bit of Kent Knight which the *other thing* couldn't take or didn't want urged him to his feet. *It* didn't seem to mind his doing that much.

Knight drew his lean, rawboned frame erect. His muscles didn't hurt any more, he realized. He ran his strong fingers—which were shaking now—through his brown hair, ruffling the rock dust out of it. He looked toward the green oasis on the far side of the rocky plain where his friends were.

It's hard to remember that I am Kent Knight. It doesn't really matter anyway. No, Kent Knight, that's the other thing! I am six feet tall. I weigh one hundred and seventy pounds. I have brown hair. My eyes are hazel with funny blue flecks in them. Remember? Looks like somebody punched at them with a sharp blue pencil—that's what Mary Jo said.

I wonder if Sammy's drunk. That last time just before we crashed should have been a drunk to finish even Sammy, his big, broken nose, shiny, bald head and all.

Yes, I know you know my every thought, Thing! You've stolen my mind. But you cannot steal me. I am Kent Knight. I am a man. You, Thing, are my enemy and man's enemy.

It chuckled in Knight's mind.

"You are whistling in the dark, fool. Have you not wondered why you crashed on this wandering asteroid? We Arkkhans willed you here. There was nothing wrong with your ship—we willed you to crash because we wanted weak creatures like you.

"You are the first we found whose minds are strong enough to contain us without destroying the motor impulses."

The Thing filled Kent Knight's mind with a thousand scenes and chuckled as the horror spread like wildfire through the little that was left of Kent Knight.

"No!" Knight cried, the muscles in his lean throat convulsing.

SUDDENLY, Kent Knight began to run. He didn't want to, but his long sinewy legs drove him across the rocky plain at reckless speed, and his mind would not answer his frantic orders to stop. His lungs burned and screamed as they sucked in the asteroid's thin air, and his heart was a writhing, sobbing thing within his straining chest.

One ankle caught between two rough hands of rock and broke, but he did not stop running. Each time the weight of his body fell fully upon that fractured bone, it splintered a little more until the shards were sharp daggers biting into what mind still belonged to Kent Knight.

Then the other foot—the right one—stepped on a razor-edged rock that cut through flesh, bone and sinew, but still Kent Knight ran on. The Thing was chuckling at the stabbing pain signals.

Finally *It* said, "No, Kent Knight?" *It* released control, and Knight sprawled on the hurting rock, the blows and stabs of the rough plain against his body unfelt through the agony of his crippled feet.

"I hate you, Thing." Knight's deadly thought reached for the Thing within his mind. Then Kent Knight cradled his head in his arms and sobbed uncontrollably, his shoulders shaking convulsively, his whole body trembling with rage and agony.

"Why rebel, Earthling? You cannot prevail against us. So simple it was to hurt you. If you but accept your destiny as our hosts, it will be pleasant. Like this!"

The sense of peace which flooded through Kent Knight then was so deep and so full, he wanted to cry again—this time because he was happy and free of pain. For the agony in the broken ankle and the slashed foot was gone. The throb of the bruises, the aching loss of his individuality, of his will, the horror of his and mankind's destiny with the Arkkhans—all these were gone.

He stood up slowly and, for the first time since he picked up the strange furry little creature from its hiding place in a

rock crevice, he felt like Kent Knight.

He lifted his dirty face, streaked with tears, to where he knew Earth must be circling its familiar old sun. He whispered, "Thing, all my life I have feared pain. Ever since I was a kid back on Earth and my pup dug his needle teeth in my hand, I have hated and feared it.

"But peace at your price is not for me. If you don't mind," and Knight's full, almost sensual lips which loved pleasure so well twisted wryly as he spoke, "I'll take the pain."

He got it . . .

IT WAS Sammy's hoarse breath, saturated with liquor fumes, that was his first sensation when he finally crawled wearily back the molten road from his hell of pain.

His mind listened avidly, reaching out tenuous fingers, searching every nook and cranny of Kent Knight's brain, seeking out the Thing. The fingers grew surer, swifter as they worked through the brain, finding only pain. Then his desperate mind relaxed. Pain was something it understood; it could take care of that.

Knight opened his eyes. Sammy's blood-flecked black ones, popping as usual from his flushed face, stared into his eyes from only inches away.

"Cripes," muttered Knight. "Sammy, you're stinking drunk again!"

Sammy pulled his face back far enough so Knight could focus his eyes. He rubbed a huge blunt paw on his shiny pate, transferred the paw to his broken nose, tried unsuccessfully to straighten the sharp curve it made to the right before he answered, very slowly and very distinctly.

"You know, Kent, I do believe that you have made a highly astute and highly correct observation. I think, however, that you are guilty of an understatement when you say only stinking drunk. I have never in my binge-ridden life been as intoxicated as I am at this present moment."

He waved his paw at Knight.

"But, Kent, there is something very definitely wrong. Something is lousing up the usual beatific feeling I have after three quarts. Honest to gosh, Kent, I have been drinking for three days and three nights, but I can't go to sleep. I can't pass out. I can't get happy." He shook his bald

head, and the wall-light made it gleam like a highly polished egg.

"Hell, Kent," he exploded suddenly. "All I do is drink and, honest to gosh, it gets tiresome lifting and dropping a bottle all the time, day and night. But I can't stop. My mind keeps nagging at me to stay drunk. It's just like there was somebody in me with me." He was shaking his head like a puzzled child.

Kent Knight sat up slowly, looked first at his feet, then wiggled them. They were healed all right. At last he looked at Sammy. *So they'd got him, too. How many of the others have the parasites? And why has my Thing left me?*

Kent Knight stood up slowly, warily, fearing that the Thing would make his muscles flaccid, limp, uncontrollable by the wee bit of mind that still was his.

He looked around the sleeping cubicle he shared with Sammy. He looked at Sammy's bald pate, the harried black eyes, remembering.

"So I've been gone for three days and three nights, Sammy?" *I couldn't have been unconscious that long, his trameled mind thought, conscious of the unfelt shackles of the Thing. He walked slowly to the porthole. His eyes traveled out past the greensward to the rocky plain.*

"Asteroid time?" He asked. That wouldn't be so bad but . . .

"Chron time," Sammy muttered. Three Earth days and nights! *Where have I been?* His mind shuddered. *Its laughter was mocking.*

Kent Knight delved through his memory.

We were exploring, that was all, checking planets, planetoids and asteroids with an eye to colonization. We cracked up here. I went looking for lead to replace a burned-out rocket shield. I saw the pretty little beastie, a furry little ball. I touched it. And it had me. I wonder if it got Sammy the same way?

He started to put the question into words. But he didn't. The answer was there. A little butterball of fur came into view when Sammy shifted his seat on the floor. *Then where is mine?* He looked around the floor, then turned to where he'd lain on the floor. It was there, still begging to be touched. He bent toward it, but the memory of pain rose up sharp. He looked at it instead.

Sammy coughed. "You nervous, Kent? Want to participate in a little snort?" Sammy took a swig out of the bottle and offered it to Knight.

"No, Sammy. That's what put me on this hellish little ship, remember? Five years of exile from Earth." Sammy nodded owlishly, and said, in the cruel honesty of men who have been broken by the same thing, "It's man's great curse, but women are worse, and you had them both."

"Not women, Sammy, a woman—but she loved another guy so I just walked out."

"Correction, please," Sammy said. "You floated out." Sammy looked sad. "That was the trouble, Kent. You should have never stopped floating. Look at me. I'm happy and I stay that way because of liquor. But you stopped, and now look at you. In the three years I've been on this ship with you, you never have smiled once. Come on, have a drink."

Kent Knight shook his head. Sammy took an extra long snort. "Honest to gosh, Kent, there must be something wrong with this stuff. It's sobering me up."

Knight looked at Sammy, thinking, *Just wait until it starts talking to you. He almost smiled at the thought. But his mind shuddered instead. Sammy was terror-stricken enough when the little D. T.imps talked to him. It would drive him mad.*

As It is doing to me. Huh-uh, his mind whispered cautiously, you don't trap me that easily. Knight strode toward the cubicle door.

He followed the passageway to the outer lock and stepped out into the asteroid's thin but breathable air. *Hide our thoughts, his mind urged, and I will tell you something. But It was listening. Two times two is four, two times three is six—what do you want to tell me, mind?—is eight, two times five is—Sammy, careful, careful, careful!—fourteen, two times eight is sixteen—Sammy what? Sammy what, mind!—I don't understand—ty-two, two times twelve is—We can't hide from It, Mind—twenty-eight.* ..

It was laughing! Knight's eyes flicked toward the spring where Captain Isaac Hansen was tasting the water.

"I know everything, Kent Knight," It chuckled. "I could tell you what your mind is trying to tell you but hide from me."

"Do you?" Knight's thought was list-

less. "Yes." The part that was still Kent Knight, though smothered by the Thing's presence, sighed, and Knight felt himself sigh almost in relief.

"No," Kent Knight said, and his lips were smiling. "You don't know what it's trying to tell me, Thing. We'll beat you. It will let me know and you won't know it."

"I will know!" The Thing's thought was sharp, almost angry, and it struck again with pain. But Kent Knight had hope again, and the pain didn't matter . . . too much . . .

WHEN it was gone, leaving only the echoes behind, Kent Knight raised himself to his feet, walked slowly toward the tiny spring where Captain Hansen was still tasting the water.

Captain Hansen, his seamed face beaming, looked up as Knight approached. His blue eyes were sparkling. "We can make millions on this water, Kent! It's the fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon sought! Why, look, I've sipped only about three ounces and look at my old hands. They're smooth and young as yours! And my face—see the fresh new skin!"

Kent Knight looked at the Captain's hands. They were age-gnarled, the knuckles big against the wizened fingers. Knight looked at the Captain's face. It was lined and rough and old. He thought, *Another manifestation of your powers, Thing? Make a man's dream come true? That is the Captain's dream. He wants never to grow old.*

But he said, and he actually put feeling into the words, "Why, you look like that picture of your son on your desk, Ike. But hadn't you better be careful? You don't know that water's strength. It might cause irreparable damage to you."

"That's right," Captain Hansen agreed. "I'm young enough now, don't you think?"

Knight twisted his lips into a smile he didn't feel, turned back toward the ship. Captain Hansen followed him, dancing.

Damn you, Thing!

It chuckled.

Knight leaned against the wall of the spacemen's mess, his eyes searching the crew members eating at the long table. *You can tell which ones still are fighting Them. They are the unhappy ones. But, God, so few of them!*

And we're hurtling toward Earth—to bring these parasitic thought-things to feed upon the minds of mankind. The ship is filled with them. Everywhere I go, my Thing whispers to those bodiless ones promising, promising, promising! Thought-conquerors . . . the power of thought had brought Man to the pinnacle of destiny. Now these—these Things—were stealing his birthright!..

"Do you see now how impossible it is, Earthman? We Arkkhans are so vastly superior to you, there is nothing you can do but bow to us? And you will be utterly happy," his Thing thought.

Into Kent Knight's mind came the soft, sweet face of Mary Jo. *Mary Jo*. The thought was a caress—warm and tender as the touch of her hand. Mary Jo, whose warmth and brightness were life to him—even now when he had lost her forever.

He was remembering. . . .

He'd known it for a long time, ever since the night when the big, flame-thatched space captain had swerved gracefully over to their table and said,

"So this is your Faith, Kent. You're right, she's magnificent. No wonder you're the best damn spacer in the system. With a Faith like that, you couldn't help it." He knew it when she leaned almost unconsciously toward him, as if she feared Bob Mallory's mocking green eyes, his lean, almost hawk-like face.

And as the weeks wore on, the memory stayed with her for she would ask this and that about Mallory. And he would answer.

He knew for sure the second time the two met. They fought—not in just words, but with their eyes, with movements of their bodies. And he knew that he could not fight that lightning with the slow-burning flame that was his love.

So he said, and with the memory came the pain again, "You love him quite a bit, don't you." Her blue eyes had looked startled at first, then almost soft, then harried, "I guess I do, Kent. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry," he said. "This sort of thing happens all the time. I don't love you so much that life would stop without you. Besides, I like Bob, he's a good joe." I kissed her, he thought, and I knew I was a damn liar, or why did I go out and try to drink the distilleries dry? Sure,

it was a hurt pride—but I still kind of like Mary Jo.

The last words he said came back. "This is it, then, Mary Jo. Good-night, good luck, goodbye."

"I will give her to you, Kent Knight," the Thing said. "Your love will be the lightning. You can hold her in your arms, feel the warmth and excitement of her, knowing that she is yours. Nothing can take her from you."

For a moment, Kent Knight was tempted to let that little bit of mind that still was his be swallowed up by the Thing. But he remembered in time.

"Like Captain Hansen's fountain of youth?" his mind asked, and he laughed.

LIKE a magnified echo to his laugh came the excited clamor of the alarm bells. The signal board in the mess began to pulse redly. Approaching mass! Asteroid, wandering star, spaceship? Knight waited.

The look-out's voice came excitedly over the intercom. "SP ship! SP ship! And her nose is red!"

And her nose is red! Cut rockets or we'll blow you out of the universe. This was no routine SP check—that would have called for a yellow signal at the Space Patrol ship's bow.

It wanted to know what was the matter. Kent could feel its thought fingers searching hurriedly through his mind. And when it didn't find an answer it grew almost frantic in its headlong scrabbling. Kent Knight's mind was chuckling. He couldn't tell the Thing why, because he didn't know himself!

The muted thunder of the rockets to which his mind and ears had accustomed themselves suddenly cut out as Captain Hansen switched off the cycs. Then there was a long moment of almost hurting silence, then the bow rockets began to fire and slow the ship.

The bow rockets ceased too, finally, and the silence came again. But all the while, Kent Knight's Thing was trying to find an answer.

Sammy came plowing into the mess, a sloshing bottle in one hand, his bald head glistening, his big nose twitching.

He said to Kent, "I knew it was too good to be true. I was just sitting in my

cubicle looking out and I saw the Moon. I conjectured that perhaps our exile had come to a premature end. But then that damn SP ship showed up."

Knight couldn't stop his mind quick enough. The Thing caught it in mid-flight, and stopped scrabbling. "So that is why. This is a prison ship and can come only so close to Earth. For a moment, I believed you Earthmen were stronger mentally than you are."

Hell, I should have known, Knight thought. This is the *Star Climber*. It's never been back to Earth since its maiden launching. It's not a prison ship exactly, just a place to live while you serve out your years of separation from Earth. And only an Earthman can know the poignant loneliness that comes when he is kept from seeing and smelling and hearing the loveliness of the planet that bore him. Five years of an indefinable torture—five years of loneliness and a sense of loss so deep that it brings you from sleep, screaming for Earth like a kid in the dark begs for his mother.

You go aboard the *Star Climber* or one of her sisters. They load you and supplies aboard. They salute you even in your punishment—you and the others who are serving the same sentences. Just before you step through the spacelock, you look up and see the beauty of Earth above you. You look down at the Moon's dusty plain.

And you set forth on your Odyssey of punishment. You can go anywhere you please. You can settle anywhere—on any planet. You can do anything you damn please so long as you stay half a million miles from Earth for the period of your sentence.

If you come closer than that, the SP ships will blow you into eternity if you do not heed them when their noses are red.

Like now.

Kent Knight strode to the viewplate and clicked it on.

Her nose was red all right. But it was fading, now that the SP's warning was heeded. But there were going to be explanations—the SP commander would come jetting across in his space suit, his regulation four-man guard behind him. "Explain why you have crossed the line," he would say. *Our story will have to be*

good, Thing, Kent Knight thought. Only an emergency will excuse the infraction. And it must be an honest-to-God emergency, or the *Star Climber* becomes a satellite of some lonely star for twice our original sentence. That should stymie you, Thing.

"Will they take our eyes, Kent?" Sammy asked anxiously, "and tow us to some god-forsaken spot and leave us?"

"I hope so, Sammy," Kent Knight breathed and the part of his mind that was his was chuckling at the Thing. It chuckled, too. "An SP ship can go to Earth," it said.

The bright flame of hope that had flared up in Kent Knight's heart was blown out by despair. Of course, what *would* stay the Things from taking over the minds of the SP crew?

"That is right," It agreed. "Nothing can stop us. Even now the commander is coming across."

KENT KNIGHT looked at the viewplate. A spacelock had opened, spewed forth five space-suited figures.

So many times I have done exactly what they are doing. Push the stud at your belt, feel the kick as the tiny cyscs take hold and spit their energy from the jets at your back. Wonder why this exile-ship came across the line? You think: Are they waiting with guns, ready to blow us up when we step into the airlock? Or is there something terribly wrong? Has the loneliness made them mad so they risk coming back just to see Earth at closer range? Or are all of them dead?

I used to think all those things, Kent Knight. Remember? Then I walked away from Mary Jo, got stinking drunk, and tried to hide it when I took a ship out on patrol. So now a commander comes to find out why we have crossed the line.

Better help out Captain Hansen now. Don't want him to start talking about how young he looks.

Kent Knight strode out of the messhall, heading for the main airlock, Sammy and his bottle tagging along behind. All around him, Knight felt the excited whisper of the Things.

"I don't know what to tell them, Kent," Captain Hansen said anxiously. "I forgot all about the line. But something kept tell-

ing me, 'We're going home. We're going home . . . ' and I just set the course. It seemed so natural, Kent."

"I know, Ike," Knight said softly. Then, as the turning levers on the inner lock moved, he added, "Here they come."

The five figures, bulky in their lead and rubberoid suits, their transparent helmets almost opaque as the lights within the ship reflected from them, closed the lock behind them. Four moved silently aside, two to stand on either side of the lock, while the commander strode toward Knight and Captain Hansen.

I must warn them, Kent Knight thought. They mustn't be taken by the Things. But I cannot move my lips. The Thing knows I want to speak. There is a way! he thought excitedly. The Thing became angry, began scrabbling through his mind, seeking the way, found it. "You will not forget to do it," It ordered. "Do it!"

With a sudden movement, Kent Knight's body grew taut. His left arm came up in a quick salute, and the SP commander suddenly stiffened, his four aides whipped atomic pistols out, held them at ready.

The left-handed salute! Knight's mind was laughing. *I fooled you, Thing! That's what I wanted to do, salute with my left hand. And you didn't catch the thought! We'll lick you now, Thing! Sure, you conquer by thought, but you can't conquer all of an Earthman's mind!*

The left-handed salute. To an SP man, that means danger, proceed with caution, destroy everything which you know or feel is inimical to you. So, Thing, just try to get them to pick up one of your fuzzy animals. The SP man's prime rule: When warned, distrust everything and everybody! You will live longer.

The SP commander left on his glassite helmet, turned on the little speaker.

"Damn my eyes," the rich vibrant voice which issued from the speaker exclaimed, "Kent Knight! Of all the exiles who should know better than to cross the line, it's you. But damn it, Kent, it's swell to see you." Gauntleted fingers reached to the SP commander's throat, twisted twice, and then pushed the glassite helmet back from a shock of flaming hair.

Even before the red hair was exposed, Knight had recognized the voice. Bob Mal-

lory, the lightning which had struck Mary Jo's love from him.

Please, God, the mind which still belonged to Kent Knight whispered, don't let the Things get him and his ship. He belongs to Mary Jo. She loves him, and he can't be her Bob Mallory with a Thing in his brain.

Ah, but what a sweet revenge! Here is the man who stole my girl. Let a Thing take his brain and let my Thing give me Mary Jo. If I cooperate I can be powerful among men. Just shake that gauntleted hand and he will have your Thing and you will have Mary Jo.

Mallory strode forward, his face smiling, one hand outstretched.

He is your enemy, Kent Knight. He brought you to this exile. He stole your Faith from you. No! The part that was still Kent Knight rebelled and the sharp stabbing memory of the pain he felt when he touched the furry little animal made him flinch. He stepped back instinctively from the outstretched hand.

It became angry. Through the tornado of pain which tore through his body, drowning out his will, Kent Knight heard his own voice saying, "Sorry, Bob, you startled me." Heard the words his lips voiced, the words which his pain-fighting mind couldn't silence. Saw his hand reach out, the hand he could not control, felt it clasp Mallory's firmly. Knew his lips smiled a smile of treachery masked in friendship.

The pain stopped. But it was too late for Mallory.

THE mocking green eyes slitted. The firm handclasp loosened. Then Bob was writhing on the deck, his handsome face grimacing, his body twisting and convulsing within the space suit.

I hope you're satisfied, Thing! Kent Knight's thought was bitter. You are giving him the pain that you gave me—pain that I wouldn't give to my worst enemy and he is a friend. Sure, he was a rival for Mary Jo, but he fought fair. I was hurt, too, sure, but it was the fortunes of love. But, see, even if I loved Mary Jo, I liked Bob. He's a grand guy...

Somehow, Thing, I will beat you. You have hurt a square guy. You have stolen his mind, just as you have stolen mine. You are destroying something fine and

beautiful. You have trampled on an Earthman's dream. For that and for Mary Jo, you will pay.

It said nothing.

His mind suddenly began to signal frantically. Knight's glance flashed to the four space guards at the portal, saw them recovering from their momentary paralysis at the sight of their commander writhing on the floor. The atomic pistols which had dropped unconsciously from the ready were coming up. The pinhole muzzles were centering on him.

"Wait!" Kent Knight's voice snapped authoritatively. "I warned him there was danger. Will you destroy me before I can explain?"

The four guardsmen hesitated. Knight said urgently, "Don't touch any living thing on this ship. Shoot anything down if it approaches you. Anything. We harbor terrible Thought Things which steal our minds. One has just seized your commander and—"

Knight's voice halted in mid-sentence.

I'm free, his mind was crying joyfully. It's gone. Act quickly, Kent Knight, act before it can come back. It is busy with Bob and he's strong enough to give it a battle so that It can't watch you, too.

Knight spun around swiftly, seeking Sammy. Sammy has the answer, his mind had said. Now to find it.

Sammy lay in one corner of the airlock entrance, one hand clutching his ever-present bottle. But for the first time in a week, Sammy had succumbed finally to the prodigious quantities of liquor he had consumed. He was sleeping like a child, the bottle held against his breast.

Kent strode over to him and reached down to shake Sammy awake. But before his hands touched the sleeping Sammy, his mind shrieked a warning. *Remember, Kent, you touched a furry beastie and you got the Thing. Careful Sammy doesn't give you his.*

Oh, Sammy, Kent Knight thought, you have the answer and then, damn you, Sammy, you pass out. Just when I'm free of my Thing—just when we need you and your answer most. Knight was angry for a moment, then his rage waned. He liked the guy, though he was always in an alcoholic fog. Unconsciously, he bent down and punched Sammy lightly in the jaw.

Instantly, he knew his mistake, and his mind cried out, *Fool!*

He flinched in expectation. But nothing happened. There was no insidious fingering in his brain. A thought developed within him. *Do the Things sleep when their hosts sleep?*

Kent Knight looked thoughtfully at Sammy's bald head and at the crooked beak of a nose. *If they did, maybe Man could win after all.*

It chuckled.

The suddenness of it plunged Kent Knight back into despair. But then his mind rallied, and he was chuckling himself. *It wasn't inside him. Its presence wasn't strong enough.*

KENT turned slowly, and the heart died within him. Bob Mallory, green eyes haunted, stared at him over the bore of an atomic pistol.

"I don't know what awful power you have, Knight," his lips twisted painfully, "but it sure played hell with me. I was going to give you a break, but now . . ." Mallory pushed at the white stud, bringing the atomic gun to full power.

"Don't you feel *It*?" Knight asked desperately. "Don't you feel the Thing in your mind?"

"I feel nothing, Knight, except that you should be exterminated. Somewhere you have picked up the power to inflict agony by the touch of your hand. I can't let you take it to Earth as I know you're planning to do."

"Mary Jo," Knight said sharply. "Mary Jo." For a moment, the haunting look was gone from the green eyes, and Mallory's lips twisted in a smile. The tense fingers on the atomic gun relaxed.

In that instant, Knight acted. *Sorry, mind, he said under his breath, but we can take care of the Thing. It isn't talking to Bob.* He seized Mallory by the pistol arm, and thought desperately, *Bob, for the love of Mary Jo, remember the left-handed salute.*

He caught Mallory's thought, a frightened, anxious thing. *Something's wrong! Something's wrong. I feel it. What is it?*

Kent Knight felt *It* flow into him, saw Mallory's puzzled face, apologized to his mind and braced himself against the pain.

He kept his eyes fixed upon Mallory's

face, saw puzzlement spread over it, and laughed at the raging Thing. He would have thought that *It* could match the previous hurt, but the pain this time . . .

THE sound of his own sobs still was echoing in his ears when he awakened. His whole body ached, but his mind was numb and only partially felt the signals. He opened his eyes, and there was Sammy. "Hello," Sammy said matter-of-factly. "I do hope you had a pleasant sleep while I battled over your body."

"It wasn't a pleasant sleep, Sammy. But what do you mean, battled over my body?"

"Exactly that, my good man," Sammy reported. "They moved us all to the SP ship, taking us to Earth for observation. Earth! Just imagine it, Kent. For the first time in three years, we'll be seeing home." He upended his bottle, his adam's apple bobbing.

"And I can obtain some honest-to-gosh Earth whiskey. No more of this stuff I've been distilling myself. Oh joy, oh rapture."

"Back up, Sammy," Knight said softly. "What's this about battling over your body?"

"Nothing too dramatic, really. They just seemed reluctant to let you go home, too. Seems as if you tried to skewer Mallory. You even beat up a couple of guards with atomic pistols. You went raving and screaming through the *Star Climber* trying to rip instruments out of the ship.

"In short, you went space crazy, Kent. You raved and babbled about some awful Thing that was running around in your mind."

"Yes?" Knight questioned quietly.

"And Mallory decided that you were better off in the *Star Climber*. He thinks you've picked up some terrible disease."

Sammy looked at Knight suddenly, searchingly.

"You're all right now, aren't you?" he asked.

It was quite a while before Knight answered. He was going over his mind with a mental fine-toothed comb. *Is It in me? I can't tell for sure. Once before I was sure It was gone, and It was here. Is It gone now?*

"Yes, Sammy," he answered finally. "I think I'm all right now. Why?"

"Well," said Sammy, taking another quick gulp out of the bottle, "You don't look all right."

His mind, which had been seeking out the Thing in Kent Knight's being, relaxed from its search and thought of other items.

"Sammy," Knight asked suddenly. "Do you feel queer?"

Sammy looked at Knight, his eyes suddenly harried.

"Honest-to-gosh, Kent, I wouldn't admit this to anybody else. But I wonder sometimes if I am all right. Everybody else seems just a little odd to me. I don't know what it is, I just feel it. But, then, maybe it's me. I'm scared all the time, Kent, and I don't know why. Sometimes, I believe something's trying to steal me." He looked up, waiting for Knight to laugh.

But Kent Knight's hazel eyes were very serious and very searching.

"Not the physical me," Sammy amended. "But the real me, the essence of me. So I try to drown that fear in my bottles. I never had that feeling until we landed on that asteroid. And now it won't go away."

You were supposed to have the answer, Sammy, Knight thought despairingly. But I guess you haven't. The Thought Conquerors have got to you, too. Because we are complex in our mental makeup, the reaction is different. You only feel there's something wrong with It in you; It didn't seem to affect Mallory much; It made Captain Hansen believe he's young; It made itself known to me and I wanted to fight It.

But how can you fight It when you have no measure of your opponent—when Its attack is so varied—when It comes and goes as It will?

He shrugged in answer. To Sammy, he put the question, "So we're going home?"

"It won't be much longer now," Sammy said. "The make ready signal buzzed just before you woke up."

The urgency struck at Knight. Only a hundred thousand miles from Earth! Rather, Earth was only a hundred thousand miles from slavery—abject submission to these Thought Conquerors, first seen by Earthmen as furry little butterballs.

Kent stood up. "You offered me a drink a couple of days ago, Sammy. I'll take that drink now." Sammy parted with the bottle, almost reluctantly.

Knight strode to the porthole and looked

out at the star-studded panorama. *We're near Earth, so very, very near. We're carrying her doom.*

He turned his back on the porthole, hoisted the bottle.

"A toast, Sammy," he said. "To might-have-been. To Earth—which, but for this ship, might have reached the stars."

Knight put the mouth of the bottle to his lips and tilted it. The fiery liquor burned in his mouth, seared at his throat, sent warm fingers reaching through his belly.

He hurled the bottle to the floor. It smashed against the duralloy and the brown liquid spread. Smashed! Like Earth as the Thought Conquerors' conquests spread.

"Are you batty, Kent?"

Knight strode from the cubicle without answering.

BOB MALLORY jerked his red head around when Knight came striding into the pilot room.

It had sensed him, Knight thought. It knows how I hate It. And—his heart was filled with a bright blaze of hope—It fears me!

Mallory's atomic pistol was out, but Knight was reckless. He leapt forward. *Come into my mind, Thing! I know you. I can fight you now. I have no weapon, no answer to your strength, but you are afraid of me!*

Somehow, Knight dodged the flashing bolt, touched Mallory's arm. *It accepted the challenge and came to him.* But the pain was sufferable. He could stand the pain! His mind was exultant. It called orders to Kent Knight and Knight answered.

"Mallory," he cried, even as a part of his mind battled against *It*. "You must turn the ship, head it away from Earth. We're carrying a cargo of death!"

Mallory's handsome face was puzzled. A sort of apathy was mixed with it.

"Move, damn you!" Knight snapped. "Fire in the aft bow rockets, kick this ship around. Signal! Signal!"

The pain of *It* didn't seem to increase, and its control of his will wasn't growing stronger. *So much pain, he thought happily, has vaccinated me against It.*

Oh, please, let there be time! Mallory turned slowly toward the control board. He was shaking his head dazedly.

"Don't shout so," Mallory said finally, almost petulantly. "I have a terrific headache." He beat at his forehead with the back of a clenched fist.

The puzzled look was fading from his face. He turned suddenly to stare at Knight. "What's the matter with you, Kent? Are you going to throw another fit?"

"Damn you, Bob, can't you hear? Kick this ship around. We're loaded with death, I tell you."

"You crossed the line," Mallory said, accusingly.

It was going wild within Knight, but it wasn't hurting so very much. The pain wasn't so strong that it completely occupied Kent Knight's mind.

Great gods of space, Knight thought in exasperation. This dumb Mallory can't understand that Earth's destiny lies in his hands. He's got to turn the ship. I can't. The Thing is just strong enough to stop me. Something had to be done to shock Mallory out of his lethargy.

"Damn it, Mallory," Kent grated. "You stole my girl! The least you can do for me is to swing this ship around. By my Faith, it means everything."

Mallory jerked. His green eyes suddenly came alive. "I stole your girl, huh? By your Faith? *Your* Faith?" Mallory spun to the control-board, snapped switches and barked alert orders.

The ship shuddered as the bow rockets kicked up a cross power that swung the bow, spinning the two Earthmen in the pilot room off their feet.

Mallory came to his feet, both fists swinging, his green eyes glinting, his red head bobbing. But Knight was quick on his feet, too, and he was dodging the light-moving Mallory.

"I'll keep *It*," he said, side-stepping Mallory. *It was weakening within Kent Knight's mind. Knight knew that the minute he had ducked Mallory's first darting punch. Just so long you can hold sway, his mind jibed at the Thing, then you succumb. This is just the start. We'll smash you one by one.*

"You haven't done it alone," *It* protested weakly. "You had a weapon, a terrible weapon, but you still don't know the weapon."

When *It* died, an intangible weight lifted

from Kent Knight's mind. The intoxication of that feeling of an untrammelled mind mingled with the fiery liquor that still burned in his belly.

"All right, Bob," he said, and he was grinning. "I'll fight you now."

Mallory grinned back. "It's all right, Kent. I'm just beginning to understand. It's hazy, but somehow I feel that I have just escaped some terrible fate. I've been in a daze ever since we challenged the *Star Climber*. But what happened to me to do that, Kent?"

Kent Knight, his mind exulting, told Mallory of the asteroid, the little fur-ball and the Arkkhans who were seeking to enslave Man.

"But our minds are too strong for them," he pointed out at last. "They can keep us in thrall just so long and then they weaken and die."

A shuffle of feet on the duralloy deck turned their heads. SP guardsmen were pushing their way into the pilot room, and they were laughing.

Their laughter brought a sudden drenching to Knight's high-flying spirits. The Things still lived within these men. The threat to Earth was still alive, so long as the Things held sway within the minds of the crewmen. *But we need only to wait, and soon their minds will kill the Thought Conquerors.*

Knight looked at Mallory. Mallory nodded and said, "It may take a long time." He reached to the control board and pushed the switch, turning the cycs up to full power.

IT WAS THEN that the little butterball of fur rolled in from the passageway and scooted across the deck toward Mallory's legs.

"Look out, Bob!" Knight called. But the butterball was quicker than Mallory's pistol. He squirmed suddenly, his face stiffening with the pain of the Thing's entrance.

Knight caught a sudden thought within his mind. With an abrupt movement, he spun, dashed for the guardsmen by the door and plowed his way through them somehow, feeling the shock of a half-dozen Things darting into his body.

But he broke through, the Things within him screaming and snarling at his mind.

Sammy had the answer! He still has the answer. Sammy has the weapon. The words pounded into his mind, upholding it against the onslaughts of the Things.

They hate me! He gloried in the thought. Let them. I have the weapon now. Hating me won't hurt any more!

He fell, tripping; one leg had momentarily refused to function as the concentrated power of the thoughts of the half-dozen Things within him lashed at his mind. He staggered to his feet, his mind fighting, his lungs laboring.

He found the cubicle door at last, and with a tremendous effort of will stepped across the threshold. Sammy was there—good, wonderful, precious Sammy, with his bald head, his hook nose and his bottle. His bottle.

He half-staggered across the room. The Things within him screamed and tore at his very soul, but he managed to snatch the bottle from Sammy's hand and gulp it hurriedly. The Things tried to make him vomit, but he held the hot liquor down until he felt it warming him deep inside.

The shock of the liquor reached into his blood stream and he felt the Things' frantic struggles wane.

Yah, he thought exultingly, yah! One man's drink is another man's poison. And, Things, are you going to get poisoned!

The Things died. *I'm just a little drunk,* Kent Knight thought. He looked down around him. For a moment, he thought he saw a half-dozen shadows on the silvery deck. But then the shadows were gone and his mind was free again.

Sammy was staring at him with worried eyes. Knight bent down and kissed Sammy's bald spot with a loud smack.

"Bless you, you stinking drunk," Knight muttered, and staggered out, bottle in hand.

Sammy was still sitting there when Knight came back with four guardsmen. The bottle he had was removed from his hand and Knight and the guardsmen staggered out.

Sammy didn't mind the second or the third or the fourth time, but, when Knight came back with Mallory and snatched the fifth bottle, he rebelled.

He hung onto the bottle. "What in the name of space are you doing with my liquor? Are you trying to put me on the wagon?"

Knight and Mallory laughed and almost as a duct shook their fingers in Sammy's face.

"We're having a purge. We are cleaning minds of nasty thoughts." Sammy relinquished the bottle, and puzzledly followed Knight and Mallory.

He followed them all over the ship, but they didn't find any more minds to purge. Finally, Kent Knight said, "I think the Arkkhans are gone, Bob."

"Yeah," the red head replied. "But maybe we ought to give everybody another slug of it just to be sure they're not hiding out."

That bottle and several others went down the throats of the crew amid the wails and laments of Sammy.

SAMMY snored peacefully in a corner as Knight and Mallory talked. "It's funny when you think of it," Mallory commented. "They must have been more than just pure thought, or how could the liquor bother them?"

"Sammy had the clue. All the time I thought he had one of them in his mind, but he didn't. His subconscious mind somehow made him stay drunk. He knew something was trying to get at him.

"I feel sure, but somehow I'll never know, that they had a physical body of some sort, else they could have roamed at will across space. They wouldn't have needed any hosts."

Knight rubbed the nape of his neck where the hackles had risen at the memory of that furry little body he had touched which had brought *It* into his mind.

"Then it seemed like an actual weight,

a physical load, lifted from my mind when the Things died in me," he added, tapping a tumbler of the amber fluid on the table between them. "I'm sure I saw their bodies fading away that last time. There were a half-dozen shadows on the floor and then they disappeared."

Mallory nodded agreement. "I saw shadows, too, when we poured that liquor down a couple of my men. But what I can't figure is why your Thing jumped back and forth. First you had it. Then you gave it to me, and took it back again."

"I guess they just couldn't help it, Bob. Maybe it was instinctive, or perhaps they needed to change hosts lest they became rooted into one and died with it."

Knight stared at the glass, picked it up. He looked quietly at Mallory. "How's Mary Jo, Bob?"

Mallory grinned. "I wondered how long it would be before you asked that. So I suppose I'd better say it now."

He picked up his glass, clicked against Knight's. "Here's to Faith," he said. "Your Faith, Kent Knight."

"My Faith?"

"Mary Jo didn't know how much she loved you until you walked out so gallantly. But," he added ruefully, his green eyes flickering, "I found out what a smash climax you gave her. So, since then I've been looking for a Faith like yours."

"Honestly, I don't see what the hell she sees in you. You're about as romantic as an old shoe. But . . ." He drank in one swift gulp.

Kent Knight only stared out into space, seeing nothing for the joyous tears in his eyes.





"You asked for it," he gritted and squeezed the release,

QUEST ON PHOEBE

By James R. Adams

Savagely, Ron Farr tore and blasted through the Saturnian moon's jungle, snarling at the timid natives to keep their distance. He sought eternal life—and they might get in his way . . .

OTHERS BEFORE HIM had tried—and failed. Ron Farr meant to succeed. He had come fully prepared to surmount whatever obstacles might lie in his path, to conquer the dread guardian jungle and its unknown terrors and return triumphant to Earth, master of destiny and possessor of undreamed of power.

Farr knew the obstacles would be there, for he sought the secret of eternal life, the fabulous elixir that lay hidden some-

where on Phoebe, enigmatic moon of Saturn, and there was little doubt in his mind that the ancients of the ringed planet had made ample provision for the protection of this, their most cherished treasure. One by one, a dozen eager men had gone in quest of the secret—none had returned. That was enough proof for him.

But, in spite of this grim evidence, Farr was not afraid. He was ready to face death itself, if need be, to gain the goal that would prostrate the world at his feet. He

was ready to face death, but he had taken every precaution against it. For instance, in selecting a likely landing place, he had shunned the area in which the life secret was reputed to be, for his instruments had detected some sort of force-field above the region. Invisible to the eye, the field would have crushed his ship in an instant, had he attempted to enter the area without consulting the instrument panel.

The region was boxed in on three sides by sheer cliffs, leaving but one avenue of approach. That was through the dense and foreboding jungle that stretched for miles across the face of the canyon.

Farr had taken that avenue. Now, as he stepped from his ship and regarded the jungle's fringe with clear, steady eyes, he looked anything but the ruthless brigand he was.

Straight black hair, high forehead, firm, unsmiling lips—all gave the man the appearance of a gentlemanly scholar. But behind those austere features lurked a cunning, treacherous mind. That he should be seeking the secret of eternal life in so surreptitious a manner was proof that the gaining of it would be put to his own advantage, and not to the benefit of mankind.

Now the thin lips parted in a wry smile as his searching gaze focused on a group of watchful creatures gathered silently at the jungle's edge. Somber eyes stared unblinkingly back at him.

Harmless beings, these, the *Mumums* of Phoebe. They resembled Earthly pygmies in stature, but were wholly alien in anatomy. Hairless and ebon-skinned, they wore only a loincloth as protection against the elements. Depending from this brief garment by means of a length of chain swung a small silvery, tubelike affair. Some sort of tribal fetish, Farr thought, intended to ward off evil spirits. The tubes gave off a musical tinkling whenever the pygmies moved, and he almost had to laugh at their ignorance in believing such nonsense could avert sickness and injury.

They seemed to be attempting to bar his way. He drew his blaster and balanced it in his hand, smiling grimly. If nothing more ferocious than these miserable beings were to test his strength and cunning, securing the life secret was going to be an easy task.

He stepped forward. The *Mumums* did

not move. His steps brought him closer, and still they remained in his way. Farr curled his lips and raised his blaster. If it was necessary to teach them a lesson, he would.

One more stride and he would be touching them. "You asked for it," he gritted and squeezed the release.

There was a hissing crack and a bright stab of flame. The *Mumum* in front of Farr fell stiffly over backwards without a sound, an ugly smoking hole drilled clean through him. The others cringed and drew back as Farr swung the blaster in a threatening arc. "Get the idea?" he grinned.

SWEAT plastered Farr's shirt to his back and streamed copiously down his masklike face. It was only an hour since he had entered the jungle, but already he was beginning to tire. His wiry muscles ached and his breath came wheezily, laboriously. Wearily he sat down on a porous rock and produced a vacuum-carton from his tunic pocket. The mushy food mixture contained in the carton was tasteless, but nourishing, and he ate in contemplative silence, keeping a wary eye on the foliage around him.

Thus far he had successfully avoided contact with malignant life-forms, but he did not allow this fact to lull him into a complacency that might prove his undoing. Even though the jungle denizens had not yet manifested themselves, he knew they were there, waiting for him to grow lax in his vigilance, waiting for his eyes to close in sleep—a sleep from which he would never awaken.

The *Mumums*—the pygmy people—were still with him. They stood a few feet away, soulful eyes watching him devour his meal. Their stares vaguely irritated Farr. What made it the worse, was that they never uttered a sound, but just watched silently, fingering those crazy silver tubes, moving when he moved, freezing into immobility when he called a halt, always keeping between him and the goal toward which he progressed.

Farr uttered a sneering laugh. They couldn't stop him! Let them stare. Let their saucer eyes reproach him. He would go on and emerge from the jungle with the secret that would place the fate of the world in his hands.

He laughed again and wiped the last

particles of the meal from his lips. The food was making him sleepy. Gratefully he allowed leaden lids to close over sun-dazzled eyes. A keen sense of danger prodded his drowsy mind, telling him to awake, to throw off the torpor before the perils of the jungle closed in on him.

By will-power alone, Farr forced his eyes open and strove desperately to rise. He seemed to be rooted to the rock, and the insidious lump of matter was sucking out his life-force, draining him of vitality. Where he had been prepared to face fang and claw, this inanimate foe had caught him completely off-guard and was swiftly fulfilling the purpose for which it had been placed here—the destruction of interlopers who sought the secret of immortality by way of the jungle.

A less determined man than Farr would have succumbed to that compelling force, would have fallen back on the stone and let the life flow from his exhausted body. But Farr was made of stern stuff, and as long as there was life in him, there was fight.

Sweat stood out in glistening beads on his forehead and his lips compressed in a bloodless slit as he marshaled his powers of concentration. Slowly his hand moved to his side, clutching at the blaster that hung there. Minutes passed as his fingers closed around the butt of the gun and inched it from the holster.

His thumb adjusted the weapon to a tight beam, then he was aiming it steadily at the rock. A thin finger of flame lanced out and drilled into the porous stone, devouring it hungrily. A moment later he leaped free as the chunk of mineral cracked under the heat and suddenly collapsed in a pile of jumbled fragments.

FARR was too shaken for a moment to do anything but stare in horror at the cooling pieces of the devil stone. Then, reaction over, he became his calculating, impassive self again. Reflection on the fate he had narrowly averted was not for him; he must push on. But he did marvel at the cleverness of the ancients of Saturn in placing the stone here. It had come close to getting him—too close, for he felt strangely lethargic and weak.

Groping in a pocket he brought forth a vitamin capsule and popped it in his mouth.

The potent stuff went to work immediately and shortly Farr could feel his energy returning, slowly at first, then faster as the capsule's contents worked through his bloodstream.

Feeling better, he tested his legs, then moved forward once more, resuming his interrupted progress through the brooding jungle. Before him the ever-present *Mumms* retreated slowly, backing away through the underbrush, always with their sad eyes fixed unwaveringly on the intruder.

Farr had come to hate those eyes, in the short space of time he had known the creatures. Though he realized now that neither they nor their owners could do him harm, still he was somehow disturbed by the intent and mournful gaze.

Shrugging off the feeling, he plodded on, moving ever toward the distant goal in utter defiance of the terrors lurking around him. Farr would not be denied his triumph and, now that he knew what to look for, he kept a wary eye out for other such diabolical traps as the devil stone.

But, in spite of his caution, he had not the least suspicion of the next snare that lay in his path, and he was hopelessly enmeshed in it before his confused mind could understand what was happening.

He had been advancing on a small grassy clearing, and as he reached its edge he stopped to regard it dubiously. The wood-free tract seemed innocent enough, and its flat expanse offered no concealment for contrivances intended to dispose of meddlers. Satisfied that it was safe, he set foot on the clearing and moved quickly across it.

Halfway across, Farr felt the ground shake under him and a low muffled droning began somewhere far below. He knew then that it was a trap, and with the celerity of one pursued by a fiend, lengthened his stride into a desperate run. But it was too late.

Things suddenly went black, and with the abrupt darkness that fell over his eyes, Farr stumbled and fell face forward in the grass. Panic-stricken, he clambered to his feet and passed a hand across his face. He saw only blackness.

"My Lord!" he cried in horror. "I'm blind!"

Farr could feel his lips moving, knew that his frantic brain had commanded the

vocal organs to speak the words—but he could not hear them. He was deaf, too. Blind and deaf! Walking through the glade, his footsteps had set in action machinery buried deep in the earth, machinery that emitted a penetrating ray, blanking out the senses of sight and hearing. Now, surely, his quest would end in blind groping through the forest, till some ravenous denizen would put a stop to his misery.

FLINGING his head back, Farr laughed shrilly, madly. Facing the guns of the planetary police, he had never known the feel of fear, but he knew it now; fear of the darkness, fear of the silence that pressed in on him. He cried out again, but not the least sound pierced the stillness in his brain.

He suddenly lunged forward and ran screaming through the glade. He did not stop until he felt the undergrowth of the jungle whipping about his legs, then he sank to the ground in a cringing heap, sobbing out his despair and beating his fists against his temples.

For an hour he sat there, staring sightlessly into space. Frenzy gave way to apathy, and he no longer strove to fight off the implacable blackness and quiet that filled his world. Death would come soon, creeping and crawling through the brush, and he could do nothing but sit and wait for it, without hope of defending himself.

Despite his despair, Farr was not the least bit penitent. He had played the game and lost, and now he was ready to pay the price of failure. His only regret was that he had fallen short of his goal, had been cheated of it by the infernal ray device, one of the many traps that had been placed throughout the jungle by the now long-dead ancients of Saturn.

His features hardened as he thought again of the secret those pitfalls guarded—the secret of immortality. If only he could yet reach it! Fumble his way through the jungle somehow and take the treasure from its cursed temple. He could still be master of the world, if he could accomplish that, master of all worlds, in fact, for who would not prostrate himself for the chance of possessing eternal life?

But it was hopeless, Farr knew. He could wander around in here until he dropped, and still be no nearer his destina-

tion than when he started. Nor could he find his way back to the ship, navigate the distance to Earth and have his eyes and ears operated on by some unprincipled, yet skillful surgeon. No, he would never have another chance at the life secret, never return to civilization with the power that he—

What was that? Was it a glimmer of light in the darkness?

Farr's heart leaped with sudden hope. Was his mind playing him tricks, or was his sight returning? He climbed to his feet, straining his eyes at the pinpoint of light. No, it wasn't his imagination; his vision was definitely coming back! As he watched, the small patch of brightness grew slowly, expanding, pushing back the fearsome darkness.

"I—I can see again," he whispered, voice shaking with emotion. Then, flaming with new-born spirit, he repeated in a shout, "I can see again!"

His joy knew no bounds as he witnessed the unfolding of this miracle. In short minutes his eyesight had completely returned to normal and his hearing, too, was rapidly improving. He began talking to himself, savoring the sound of each word as it impinged on his eardrums. He caught sight of the *Mumums*, standing at a distance, mute and motionless as ever, and he yelled to them, "Hi, you ugly things! Am I glad to see you!"

Indeed, Farr was glad to see anything again, after that awful blackness that had blotted out his most precious sense. The ray had been intended to destroy his hearing and sight, but he had escaped its field in time to avoid permanent injury. Had it not been for the unreasoning fear that overwhelmed him, he would have remained there in the glade, to flounder about helplessly and eventually succumb to thirst and hunger.

Now, he was again in full possession of his faculties, and just as determined as ever to continue on to his destination. Twice he had fallen prey to the ingenious devices of the Ancients, and both times emerged unscathed. He was now convinced that the jungle could produce no obstacle that his cunning could not overcome.

Thus decided, Farr took his bearings. Finding that his flight had brought him to that side of the glade nearest his goal,

he had nothing to do but resume his march through the lush Phoebe plant-life.

On two occasions during the next few hours he came across grim discoveries, discoveries that made him shudder in spite of his callousness—sun-bleached, grinning skeletons. He found the first one draped over a devil stone, picked free of carrion, mute testimony of the insidious rock's power.

The other lay not far away in a clump of bushes. As Farr approached, the willowy branches of the shrubs whipped into sudden action, flicking gobs of black, gooey matter directly at the surprised spaceman. He dodged aside with a cry of dismay, barely averting contact with the stuff. Several of the viscid wads plopped against the bole of a tree and began eating furiously into the bark.

Eyes bulging, Farr turned and fled, putting distance between himself and the deadly bushes. No wonder there hadn't been much left of that second heap of bones! The shrubs were living acid manufacturing, remaining dormant until the approach of a victim, then to spring into life and bombard the prey with gobs of the fatal stuff.

And those blanched remains back there—they had once been living men, like himself, in search of the legendary life secret. But unlike him, they had not been clever enough to elude the pitfalls of the jungle, and had died agonizing deaths, miles short of the goal. Farr was glad it was so, else the secret would not now be there for him to pluck from its pedestal and mold to his own use.

MANY HOURS LATER, Farr emerged from the jungle to stand at last at the entrance to a desolate canyon. Aching in every muscle, battered, bruised and hardly able to stay on his feet, he felt a surge of new energy as he spied his objective, near the center of the valley.

The temple was old, very old. Its walls were drab gray, as if with the grayness of age, and a great silence hung over it, unbroken by even the strident sounds of insect life. But in spite of its gloomy, tomb-like appearance, there was an air of magnificence about the temple, a faint aura of greatness once known, but long since gone. It was at once beautiful and forebod-

ing, guardian of the heritage left by the Ancients to those with courage and intelligence enough to win it.

Farr was not impressed. Beauty meant nothing to him, save the beauty of power. But he noted the *Mumums*, still with him, were stirred by the scene. Throughout the trek through the jungle, they had shown no signs of emotion, but now they were milling about restlessly, staring at the temple and chattering excitedly among themselves.

Drawing a deep breath, he moved cautiously into the canyon, blaster ready at his side. There was no telling what hellish devices he had yet to face, and he did not intend to be robbed of the life secret now, having come this far along the road.

Sheer cliffs soared high above on three sides of him, and one look told him that no one could scale those dizzy heights. The *Mumums*, scampering ahead of him, silver tubes tinkling melodiously, reached the edifice's yawning portal and stood staring apprehensively into the impenetrable darkness. He followed quickly, eager to secure the elixir and leave this dismal canyon far behind.

Twenty feet from the looming entrance, something rattled loosely under his step and he bent to examine the object. A skull. His eyes traveled across the ground and spied the body of the skeleton lying between two boulders. He stepped over to the grisly relic and knelt beside it, regarding it thoughtfully.

Clutched in the bony fingers was a corroded blaster, and through the tatters of the dead man's rotted tunic protruded charred stumps of ribs, grim indication of the last use to which the gun had been put. Suicide! But why? Had the man been enmeshed in some trap from which there was no escape? No; if that were the case Farr himself would now be caught in its toils. At this realization he jumped back with a start, cursing his thoughtlessness in approaching the spot without first examining the surroundings.

But nothing happened and, thus reassured, he moved close again, puzzling over the inexplicable mystery confronting him. To all appearances the man had been free to leave the valley whenever he so willed. Yet he had snuffed out his own life—that last desperate measure one takes when

he is faced by some barrier above which his resources cannot lift him.

Tiring of the problem, Farr gave the remains one last scornful look and moved away. He had no sympathy for one who comes out second best in a contest of cunning. But as he walked on to the temple and passed into its shadows he felt a dark premonition of danger edging into his mind.

He paused inside the structure's entrance and switched on a torch, sweeping its beam about the chamber in which he stood. The room was cubical, small, dank and musty with age. Blank walls stared back at him mockingly, and for the briefest instant he again experienced a feeling of impending doom, then it faded as before.

Before moving on into the temple proper, he looked over his shoulder to see if the *Mumums* had followed. They hadn't. They crowded around the portal, jabbering shrilly and jostling one another in their eagerness to get a better view, but carefully refrained from entering.

Shrugging, he turned away. He had no time to wonder at the stupidity of the *Mumums*; there were more important matters to look after. Directing the ray of the torch before him he located an inner door and moved through it, heart leaping in sudden excitement at the sight.

There, resting in solitary splendor atop a marble pillar in the center of a vast hall, was the object which he had braved every conceivable type of horror to obtain. Awed in spite of himself, he walked slowly forward, eyes riveted in fascination on the gleaming prize.

Then the spell was gone and he broke into a run, a shout of exultation on his lips. He caught up the object from its pedestal and waved it wildly overhead, brain enfevered by the triumph of the moment. He brought the gleaming metal cylinder in front of his eyes and gazed at it in rapture. Power. This represented more power than any man had known, and plans for its use were already spinning in his brain.

Something rustled dryly in the vacuum container. Powder; it was a powder, rather than a liquid. The legend had erred on that point, but the discrepancy was inconsequential. He peered eagerly at the container, expecting to see the formula of the powder

inscribed thereon. There was none, but it did not disturb him. Chemists could analyze the stuff and manufacture it.

Flashing his light once more over the great hall to make certain he had missed nothing, he strode buoyantly to the entrance and passed into the small outer chamber, thrusting the container of powder in his tunic pocket as he went.

IMMEDIATELY a dazzling brilliance lit up the room. Varicolored lights played about his head, blazed radiantly in his brain and etched every cell in bold relief. Farr fell to his knees, throwing his arms over his eyes in a vain effort to shut out the light. The torment in his mind was unbearable, agonizing.

The door! He had to make it to the door! Stumbling to his feet, he propelled himself on unsteady legs to the entrance, hurtled through it and down the temple steps, where he collapsed in a quivering, gasping heap on the rocky valley floor.

Another narrow escape! He could not guess the nature or effect of the lights, but undoubtedly they had been meant to dispose of him in some hellish fashion. Apparently he had sustained no injury, though his head did feel peculiarly light.

Shaking his head dizzily, Farr arose and felt in his pocket. The cylindrical container was still there, and he breathed a rasping sigh of relief. All that remained now was to return to his ship and rocket Earthward, where his plans for the life secret would immediately be put into effect.

The *Mumums* brought up the rear now, apparently resigned to the fact that their puny efforts to prevent the theft of the secret had failed. Knowing that he would no longer be confronted by their unwinking gaze was a comfort to Farr, and he moved quickly across the sweltering valley.

Moving rapidly as he was, he had no time to avoid crashing into the towering wall of rock that loomed suddenly in his path. Strangely he felt no pain as he clambered erect, but the very unexpectedness of the collision stunned him, confusing his befuddled mind even more.

There should be no wall here, yet here it was. Farr could not deny that, though he could have sworn it had not been here when he entered the canyon. There was nothing to do but walk around it.

The cliff stretched a hundred yards to either side of him. He began moving along it, a fierce anxiety to escape this infernal place beating in his brain. The inscrutable *Mumums* followed, pattering along on bare feet.

He had covered what seemed like forty yards, when he stopped and stared in puzzlement at the craggy precipice. He looked back along the wall, then ahead, peered up at its dizzy heights, then down at its smooth base. Color drained from his face and his shoulders slumped in defeat.

He was beaten, Farr knew it. Knew too why that other adventurer had never left the valley, why his brain was spinning and whirling like a mad dervish. The ray in the temple—he could easily guess now what it had done to him. For stone does not move of its own power, and the cliff *had* moved. Its terminations still reared a hundred yards in either direction from him!

It was an illusion, that wall, an illusion conjured by his own ray-impregnated mind. But for him it was real. He could spend eternity walking along its face, yet never would he reach the end of the barrier.

He watched dully as a *Mumum* scampered past and melted into the cliff. Mad-denying to know that the wall existed only in his own mind. He tried to concentrate, tried to nullify the terrible force that had invaded his brain. If he could do that, the cliff-illusion would vanish.

Veins stood out on his forehead with the effort; but the wall remained, seemingly solid as ever to his touch. The ray-force was too powerful.

Farr wanted to scream, wanted to hurl himself at the barrier and pound and tear at it with all the wild energy of a trapped animal. But he couldn't. His emotions were played out. He could only stand like a burnt-out robot, his apathetic eyes following the antics of the *Mumums* as they popped in and out of the wall-illusion, taunting him, trying to drive him mad with the realization that only he could not pass through it to freedom.

The Ancients had triumphed. The life secret would remain in this valley, eternally guarded by the ingenious ray that warped men's minds and made them see illusions that to them were insuperable actualities. Not until a Master Intellect claimed the

heritage for the human race, would it ever leave here.

Farr was not that Master Intellect, and he knew what he must do now. His blaster came slowly from its holster. He brought the gun to his temple.

His finger tightened on the trigger. White fire exploded in his brain, cooking the cells, melting them. A last scream of defiance ripped from Farr's lips, then his form went suddenly limp and crumpled to the ground, to lay silent . . .

IT WAS Londar's time to return the cylinder to the temple. Its contents were worthless, he knew, but it was the Ancients' command that the ritual be observed, so the pygmy-creature dutifully bent and retrieved the gleaming container and walked slowly with it toward the brooding edifice.

To carry out his mission, Londar would be forced to pass through the Great Lights, and Londar was afraid of the lights, much in the same way savages of Earth fear the magic of witch doctors. But the intelligence of the *Mumums* was slightly above that of savages, and Londar realized in a vague way that the lights could not harm him, could not do the things to him they had done to the black-haired man from the sky.

For, long ago, he had swallowed several of the mysterious crystals contained in the small silver tube swinging at his waist. The Ancients had commanded him to do that and Londar had complied, as had all his race, out of their great respect and love for the wise ones. The Ancients were gone now, had vanished into the sky many seasons since. But Londar and his people had lived on, ageless, undying, tirelessly performing the strange duties assigned them by the masters.

Some day, another great race would come, and Londar's people would then surrender the silver tubes. The black-haired man might have been the representative of such a race, but he had shown contempt for the *Mumums* and had slain Kyrrad. That would not be the way of a true people of supreme intellect.

Londar walked on, the silvery tube fastened at his waist tinkling musically in rhythm to his stride.

The Martian Circe

By **RAYMOND F. JONES**

Who was this sweet-voiced singer weaving a spell of dreams and drugs that drove men mad and threatened to smash the System? SBI Captain Roal Hartford dared the death of the Thousand Minds to learn her dreadful secret!

THAT'S WHAT THEY called her, Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, and she was singing when Roal Hartford stepped into the Starhouse.

The setting was the same—the swirling blue smoke from scores of zhema cigarettes, the odor of stale alcohol and penetrating Valcoso. The setting was the same

Her screams rang through the chamber.





as in a thousand other taverns hovering in the backwash of man's advancing conquest of the planets. Only Alayna made this Martian tavern any different from the rest.

The silence while she sang was tribute. The brawling and the laughter and the loud curses stopped for no other tavern singer but Alayna.

As Roal Hartford stood motionless in the doorway, listening, he knew why they called her the Queen of the Silver Stars. She was a queen to these men. Those who listened were men who had no home, and she sang of home to them. She sang of green fields and blue skies and of lovers and of children. Her voice was so low and deep that it was like a husky sob in her throat and they had to strain to hear.

Roal glanced at a table where bearded, drunken space miners listened to the dream of which she sang. One of them with a livid burn scar across his face turned away from his companions and ran a finger over his eye.

For an instant Roal himself was lost in that dream. He thought of far Earth, which he had not seen for so long. The conquest of space seemed suddenly futile. It was nothing but a vain waste of lives and energy and brought no one happiness. Yet why should a man live except for happiness? Someone like Alayna could be happiness for him, he thought. The Queen of the Silver Stars could be happiness.

He dragged his mind abruptly out of the dream world of Alayna's song. He was Captain Roal Hartford of the Solar Bureau of Investigation. His world was the world of dope peddlers, thieves, and murderers that infested the starways. He was a little cog in a great machine and he knew that he had to keep going to keep the machine from breaking down. It wouldn't do for him to wonder why the machine should be kept running at all.

Alayna's song ended, but the silence hung on for an instant. Then slowly the spacemen and gamblers turned back to one another, avoiding each others' eyes until they were sure their own were dry.

ROAL Hartford moved away from the doorway and picked his way among the tables. He was not here in the guise of Captain Roal Hartford of the SBI.

His matted beard and space-worn garb was like that of the dozen meteor miners scattered through the tavern room. Miners who kept going day after day because of the yarns of occasional fabulous treasure found floating on the spaceways. But no one of them had ever seen such treasure—they had only heard of it, and kept going in the hopes of some day making a strike that would in turn create new fables of vast treasure.

Roal moved with the shambling gait of one worn and haggard by months among the meteors. When he sat down at a table he rested his head on his hands a moment until one of the shy little Martian girls came to take his order.

The Martians were like withered flowers. The little creature beside him must not be more than twenty of her planet's years, Roal thought, but her skin was like old and dried leather. The bones could be seen through the flesh almost. Only her eyes were bright and they peered at Roal with a staring glance that gave him uneasiness. All the Martians were that way. He thought it was as if he were a deadly enemy and they looked at him as if they were sure of eventual victory over him.

He shrugged the thought away. In the hundred years of Terrestrial association the Martians had not been guilty of a single overt act. At first, of course, there had been conflict, but a century of peace stood to assure continued amicable relations.

"Valcoso," Roal ordered.

Silently, the Martian moved away and Roal turned his eyes to the surroundings in the room. While he had pretended to be resting he had kept his glance on Alayna. It seemed incredible that after a year on the starways he should suddenly find her like this. He had listened to a thousand tales of spacemen who had sworn to having visited the phantom tavern, Starhouse, of hearing the song of Alayna, who could shake the stoutest of spacemen with the tenderness of her songs in that husky, almost inaudible voice.

He had thought of a thousand things that she might be, but he had never pictured her like this. He had even begun to doubt the reality of her existence. Now he had found her he didn't know what he was going to do.

She was slender and sweet, and she could not possibly be the mistress of death and insanity that was sweeping through the planets and outposts. Surely she could not be the lure that enticed men into the gripping tentacles of the drug, *harmeena*.

But every clue he had picked up bore a thread that linked with the Queen of the Silver Stars. Miners with shattered minds had spoken in their last hours of Alayna, and in their croaking voices had tried to sing her songs before they died. Because of her they died with smiles upon their lips.

But, because of her, many of them died.

The SBI had a hundred agents scattered in every part of the System. No one took seriously the miners' and spacemens' yarns of a phantom tavern where a golden-haired girl sang songs that lured them into a dream world from which they could never return.

No one, that is, except Roal Hartford. He knew that somewhere in the tales repeated by a thousand dying throats there must be a thread of truth, regardless of how fantastic it might be. Somewhere there must exist the phantom tavern, Starhouse, though one spaceman told of visiting it in Heliopolis and another spoke of its existence in the swamp city, Tarma, while still others swore that it was in Vegraht across the planet from Heliopolis.

Roal had placed investigators at every point where Starhouse had been reported, but nothing had ever come of it.

NOTHING—until he had walked along the night streets of Heliopolis and suddenly seen Starhouse there where it seemed to him that it had always been.

And the moment that he had entered and heard the first note of Alayna's song he knew he had found the Queen of the Silver Stars.

Her beauty must have been exquisite and flawless, once, Roal thought. It was still the nearest thing to perfection that most men would ever see. But there were traces of strained lines, and hollows where her cheeks should have been more rounded. There was something, too, in her eyes that Roal could not bring himself to look upon for long as she suddenly caught his gaze and stared back at him.

He turned his eyes away. And, when he looked again, he swore. It seemed he had looked away only for an instant, scarcely long enough for her to have crossed to the nearest wall, yet she was gone. And the space miner she had been talking to had also vanished.

Without appearing to be concerned, Roal glanced about, searching the walls and side passages where she might have gone. From upstairs there came sounds from the gambling rooms. Elsewhere in the building were other rooms of doubtful uses. Passageways opened from the main tavern room to these other chambers, and there was no telling which way Alayna had gone.

Then abruptly she returned — alone. Roal saw her standing in a doorway leading from a hall opposite him. And she was going to come to him. The thought that he was at last to meet the mysterious Queen of the Silver Stars filled Roal with mixed feelings. Her eyes were upon him, speculating, weighing, he felt, his susceptibility to her charms that would make him her next victim.

As she came slowly towards him the transparent folds of the garments that thinly veiled her floated like a nimbus of light about her figure. And the eyes of the men in the room were upon her. She sat down beside Roal.

"You're a stranger here." Her low, husky voice made it a statement, rather than a question.

"The dream of every spaceman is to visit Starhouse and hear Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, at least once before he dies."

"You're far from dead, miner."

"My good fortune in coming here so soon."

"Starhouse is a place of rest and dreams for weary spacemen. They all find their way here sooner or later."

"I have heard stories—from those who have found dreams here," Roal said cautiously.

"Yes—you would share the dreams of Starhouse?" Alayna spoke with even more caution. Roal felt her eyes trying to weigh and evaluate him in terms of the worn, haggard spacemen who were the regular habitués of Starhouse.

"I would like to know the dreams of Starhouse," said Roal.

"Come with me."

Heart beating more rapidly, Roal downed the last of the Valcoso and rose to follow Alayna. He did not miss the throbbing pulse that beat in the white column of her throat, nor did he miss the faint sweep of revulsion that crossed her face for an instant as she rose and felt the scores of eyes staring at her—through her filmy garments.

Seizing upon this faintly-revealed trait, Roal suddenly drew his heavy cloak from his own shoulders and laid it upon her. Instinctively, she grasped its protection and drew the collar tight about her throat. Then, realizing her betrayal of her role, she hurled the cloak to the floor and stamped upon it.

"Your insolence will find you trouble, miner!"

Silently, Roal reached down and picked up the cloak while guffaws rained upon him from nearby tables. But he had seen enough—enough to know that Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, was putting on an act that was repulsive to her own instincts. Some compulsion was forcing her to remain in the stinking, smoke-filled tavern, exposing her loveliness to the lewd stares of starmen nightly.

She held her golden head high as Roal followed he past the tables into one of the halls leading out of the tavern room, but as they passed out of sight of the tables, her head inclined and her shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly.

"Poor little Alayna—" Roal whispered.

She whirled on him, her azure eyes ablaze, but whatever hot words trembled on her lips were not spoken. Nor did her hand that stretched back come up to sting his cheek.

While her moment of rage persisted, Roal memorized every line of tension in her lovely face. Beneath her beauty and the husky tenderness of her voice, strong storms of conflicting motives surged with force enough to tear her slim body.

But the moment passed and Alayna subdued the storm, not daring to speak. She whirled her back upon Roal and continued to lead the way down the hall.

The passage was dimly lit and thickly carpeted. The sounds of the distant tavern room were deadened and only silence prevailed. Doors, silent and closed, lined the

hall. Roal wondered what lay behind them. Abruptly, Alayna stopped and opened one and stood aside to allow Roal to enter.

"The place of dreams, miner. Pleasant dream to you." From a cupboard against one wall she took a bottle of wine and poured a glassful. Then two glistening white spheres like pearls were taken from a drawer and dropped into the wine. Instantly, a white smoke rose from the glass of wine and began to fill the room.

Alayna stared at it for a moment, then broke. "Miner, quickly! Don't inhale! Come with me, quickly." She was sobbing unrestrainedly now. She flung open the door to plunge into the hall. But she didn't leave the room.

IN THE DOORWAY stood the biggest man that Roal thought he had ever seen. Not fat—*big*.

His bare biceps revealed by a sleeveless blouse were like huge brown logs. His great chest was like a slowly swelling drum of polished leather. Alayna's golden head collided with it as she darted outward.

The man made no move nor uttered any word. He merely remained in the doorway, arms akimbo. His hairless, polished skull was immobile as a brown boulder. Only the pin-point lights of his eyes betrayed life and fury.

Alayna gave a short gasp that ended in a sob of torment. Then she ducked under one of those great arms and left the room. Only then did the man move. He stepped backward and slammed the door before Roal's astonished senses could lead him to make a motion.

He tried the door uselessly.

During all that long interval of Alayna's outburst he had held his breath against the rising smoke from the wine glass. Now he plunged down on the soft couch in the center of the room. Gladly, he noticed that the artificial lights in the room were dimming. From his jacket he extracted a brown capsule and broke it between his teeth, covering his act so that anyone spying upon him might not detect the capsule. Then, as his vision grew spotty from lack of oxygen, he allowed himself to breathe cautiously.

The secret antidote against the effects of *harmeena* had never been tried before.

It had been prepared by chemists of the SBI from analysis of the bodies of dead miners who were known to be addicts. Every agent of the SBI carried the antidote. None had ever had the opportunity to try it before. Roal prayed that it might work.

The lights had dimmed completely now. But the gas from the dissolving pellets in the wine glass was filling the room with luminescence. Its ghostly glow swirled and twisted like crazed demons and poured into every corner and crevice of the room.

Upon this ghostly screen Roal knew that the wild dreams and fantastic visions induced in his brain by the drug should be projected. He waited in tense anxiety, hoping they would not come, hoping that the antidote the SBI chemists had devised was correct.

The visions did not come. That screen of luminous gas remained blank. But it spun and swirled about him as if it were a living thing and realized the defeat he had administered to it.

It seemed to spin tentacles that leaped out and beat upon him, twisting and dragging at him as if to beat down his last resistance. A wild impulse to laugh back at the ghost demons possessed Roal. He almost gave way to it.

Then sweat broke out upon his brow. Perhaps *this* was evidence in itself that the drug was prevailing against his senses in spite of the antidote.

The ghost demons fighting against his senses were only phantoms of unreality, but he had to fight back their reaching fingers. He closed his eyes against them and told himself that they weren't there. But they were. They took on form and shape and horrid faces. Laughter rang in his ears until he couldn't stand the sound of it. He knew that he had work to do. He must make an examination of the place, find escape from this room somehow and search through the halls and rooms of Starhouse to find out its forbidden mysteries.

He rose from the couch and all the silver demons in the room pounced upon him, beating his skull with tenuous lashes. He made his way to the cupboard despite their onslaught and took out one more of the *harmeena* spheres and dropped it into the secret pocket in the lining of his jacket.

But more than this, he could not do. The devils beat him back to the couch and pounded his head with psychotic hammers until his senses slowly waned and died.

II

BLAZING HOT SUN out of a Martian noon sky fell upon Roal Hartford when consciousness returned. He was lying face down upon the hot sand and it was in his mouth and eyes and stung his nostrils. It seemed as if he had been groveling in the sand, trying to burrow into it in his unconsciousness.

He struggled up, and the memory of those beating, silvery demons haunted him in the sunlight. But they were not to be seen now. Neither was anything else of the phantom tavern, Starhouse. Not that nor even Heliopolis itself.

He was alone in the barren desert and arid sand dunes stretched as far as he could see. Yet on the horizon was the faint suggestion of the towers that might be Heliopolis beyond the sands. But he knew it was no use trying to find his way there by walking. The mirages of Mars are treacherous beyond reason.

Roal got to his feet and felt at his waist for the tiny SBI transmitter that could place him in communication with the SBI office in Heliopolis. The communication unit seemed not to have been disturbed by those who had dumped him in the desert, probably to die.

On the tiny instrument he dialed the call of Commander Calvin, head of the department on Mars. In a moment, answer came.

"Commander Calvin? This is Hartford. I've been taken for a ride."

There was a moment of violent sputtering on the other end of the circuit, then a trace of clarity came into the speech. "You dunderheaded idiot! How did you let yourself get into that kind of a jam?"

"I'll report if you will send out a pickup ship."

"I don't know if there's one in port or not. All we do is pick up you infants who get lost and can't find your way home. Where are you?"

"Out in the desert somewhere. I'll keep a carrier on for a direction finder if you can make it in an hour or so."

"Well, just between the two of us I hope your battery runs down and we can't find you."

Calvin cut off amid Roal's grin. The Commander would be burning up the channels right now ordering a plane to pick him up as quickly as possible, Roal knew.

There was nothing to do but wait, leaving the transmitter on to guide the ship. It didn't matter whether its power lasted or not. Once they got a bearing on him, they could find him as long as he stayed right there.

The sun was almost unendurable with his lack of water. He scooped out a deep spot in the sand until he came to a layer still cool from the night's radiation. He sat in the trench and covered himself up to his neck, then covered his head with his cloak. In relative comfort he could wait a considerable time, even if one of the treacherous sand storms should come up.

He let his mind drift back to the events of the previous night. The antidote of the SBI chemists had been only partially successful, he knew now. There had been no such fanciful, absorbing visions of peace and loveliness as he had heard described by others, but the effects he had seen were enough for him. The demon attacks had been the natural conflict between the drug and the antidote.

The strange mystery of the phantom tavern and its mysterious Queen of the Silver Stars was no nearer solution than before, however. He knew only that they did exist and that was something.

But who was the fabled Alayna? Why was she playing the role of temptress in that ghastly place against her will? For Roal was certain that if she was not there against her will she was at least held by some force that overpowered her own real desires.

The Starhouse was a den of evil and vice, lust and violent death. But Alayna? Roal shook his head and wondered if he had been merely overcome by the same illusions that seized all who went to the Starhouse. Was Alayna herself only a part of the dream of peace and happiness that Starhouse doled out with the deadly drug *harmeena*? Or was her loveliness and hidden tenderness something real?

Roal remembered the slight, almost hid-

den gesture of loathing she had made when she rose before the hungry eyes of the patrons of Starhouse, the instinctive shrinking beneath his cloak when he had placed it about her. He remembered the throaty song of hers in which she painted dreams of green Earth and lovers under blue skies.

That dream was not part of her act. That dream was Alayna. It was the only real thing in the whole ugly fabric of Starhouse. He was going to gamble on that.

A sudden rustling in the sand brought his eyes darting about. It was too early for the patrol ship. Then he saw the source of the sound. Two brownish, dessicated Martians stood not ten feet away, staring down at him. They had seen him, so there was no reason for obeying the instinct to keep silent.

"Have you water?" he called in their native tongue.

"We have water, Earthman. We will help you. Come to the burrow of Toomar."

"I must wait here for my ship. Can you bring me water?"

"Our burrow is close. It is cool and we have much water."

In his mind Roal had been trying to cautiously avoid the subject of water. Now that he had allowed it in the forefront of his consciousness a parching thirst burned within him. He had to have drink, and soon.

He scrambled out of the hole and looked in the direction of the pointing finger of Toomar, the friendly Martian.

"Only a quarter of a mile," he estimated. "They can't miss me if I move that far. Let's go."

TACITURN, after the manner of their kind, the Martians made no conversation on the way. Their burrow was invisible on the surface to the untrained eye, but Roal's experienced vision detected its presence as they approached. A sand colored slab moved aside to offer them entrance.

Descending into the cool depths beneath the sand, Roal found himself in the near darkness which the Martians loved. This seemed to be an unusually large family and the chamber into which he came was crowded with the withered, shrunken crea-

tures who made no comment as Toomar introduced him.

The cool of the burrow felt wonderful after the hours in the blistering sun, but after his drink Roal arose. "I've got to get to the surface. My plane might miss me if I remain. Good years to you for your services."

"Please remain," the guide said. "We have food."

Roal gagged at the thought of partaking of the repulsive soup of desert lizards which was the Martians' mainstay.

"It has not been long since I have eaten," he said. "Many thanks for the water. I must wait for my ship."

They crowded about him. Their foul smelling bodies pressed close. They seemed not to have heard what he said. Their fingers touched his arms and seemed to fumble at his clothing. Worried by the alien behavior, he glanced around the group. Their dried-prune faces told him nothing.

Then, abruptly, Toomar spoke, "Of course. We would welcome you to our hospitality. But you must go to your ship. Go with our blessings. You have graced our burrow."

The crowding Martians melted away and allowed him access to the ladder leading to the surface. He scurried out of the stinking burrow, glad to breathe again the clear, light air of the desert. But a sudden sound as he emerged from the shaft made him whirl his head about.

A low flying patrol plane was vanishing rapidly northward.

Roal switched on the controls of the transmitter which he had cut off in the burrow. "SBI patrol. Hartford calling. Directly behind you."

"Look, Bud. What's the idea playing hide and seek in that hole?"

Roal grinned into the mike. "Hi, Shorty. Lucky you didn't have to come dig me out of it. Calvin might have been real mad."

"Maybe you think he isn't anyway. He was sore enough when you called, but right after that something else stirred his dander and he's really off on a tear. You'd better have a good story for him."

"Maybe you think I haven't," Roal murmured.

Shorty Mullins, the SBI patrol pilot, landed his ship a moment later, flinging a

sand cloud into the sky with his customary dramatic handling of the ship.

The ship required only a few minutes to make the trip to Heliopolis. Roal had been barely out of sight of it.

As yet, no explanation of his presence in the desert had occurred to him, except that he had been carried out there to die. But if that were the case, he wondered why he had not been killed in the Starhouse. Did it mean that the leaders back of the dope ring knew his identity and were afraid to murder an SBI man? He wasn't sure. And he couldn't think straight on the problem for the golden voice and the golden hair of Alayna pervaded his senses. He felt infinitely saddened by her connection with this ring of vice and murder.

The office of the SBI in Heliopolis was in the highest shimmering spire that looked down upon the chromium city. Every time Roal looked down upon the splendor of the city from that high tower it reminded him of a fruit rotten at the core.

For Heliopolis was rotten. Rank vice and corruption filled its streets. And the Starhouse was the most vicious of all. But it would not remain long, now that it's location was known. The only thing that puzzled Roal was that it had not been noticed before in Heliopolis. He thought every dive on seven planets was listed in the files of the SBI, but the Starhouse had evaded listing until now.

LANDING on the rooftop, he went quickly to Commander Calvin's office. Shorty Mullins had made no mistake about Calvin's state of rage.

He greeted Roal. "Another of my double-barreled idiots back safely in the fold. I wonder why some of you can't stay permanently lost. Then maybe I could get me a good crew."

Roal knew he'd have to let the Commander roll on until his momentum was worn down.

"Imbeciles! Children losing their playthings. By all the stars and little planets it would seem that the SBI would attract the services of at least one pair of brains."

"Beside your own, of course," Roal said.

"Of course," Calvin snapped. "What are you here for? Put it in a written report.

I haven't time to listen to your mouthings. Ignorant, stupid trash that call themselves operators—can't hang onto anything—"

"Something lost?" Roal inquired mildly.

"Oh, no! Nothing's lost—nothing at all. Just that that idiot Markham let his antidote capsule be stolen and he swears he doesn't know where it could have been pinched. Oh, why aren't there brains—??" Commander Calvin finished weakly.

"Perhaps this theft explains a part of the events in connection with my own troubles," Roal said.

"Put your troubles in a report and file them!"

"Perhaps you'd be interested to know that they started in the Starhouse, that I've sat at a table with the Queen of the Silver Stars."

Calvin's mouth dropped open and then clamped tightly. "So they got even you," he muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Your rational mind is of course aware, my boy, that the Starhouse and the Queen are only myths of drugged minds. They do not exist in reality."

"The Starhouse is right here in Heliopolis, on Transite Street, the 800 Block."

"Where is your antidote?" Calvin roared suddenly.

"I ate it."

"You what?"

"I told you I was in the Starhouse. I found the drug, *harmeena*, and the manner in which it is used. I tried the antidote against it. It was only partially successful."

"Partially—a generous term."

"I have something else, too. The first sample of *harmeena* to fall into the hands of the SBI."

Calvin's eyes lighted in spite of himself. "If you're telling the truth—"

Roal fumbled in the secret pocket where he had hidden the sphere. His fingers roamed up and down. The pellet was not there.

In sudden anxiety he whipped out a knife and methodically ripped the coat to shreds. The *harmeena* was gone.

His mind went back over the intervening hours. He had felt the sphere when he had awakened on the desert. He couldn't have lost it in the meantime. Nothing could possibly get out of that secret pocket. Except by —

He sat down weakly as he remembered the Martians. He remembered their crowding in the dark burrow, their strange behavior and their fumbling fingers that touched him.

The withered Martians in the desert had stolen the *harmeena*. Somehow they had known he had it and had been ordered to get it. But how and by whom?

III

"YOU SWEAR you cannot account for the antidote?" said Commander Calvin. His seriousness had overridden his rage now. "If that gets into the hands of the dope ring and they know we have it, we'll never catch up to them. It's possible that they don't have Markham's."

"I'm serious, Chief," said Roal. "I found the Starhouse last night. I ate the antidote and submitted to a dose of the drug. It finally knocked me out, but I know the antidote was a great help. Why I was dumped in the desert, I don't know. But come with me right now and I'll show you where Starhouse is. Why it should ever have become known as the phantom tavern, I don't know. It's right down on Transite Street."

"You've been a good operator, Roal," said Calvin. "But I can't believe a word you're saying. I know every dive on Transite. Starhouse is not there, but to show you I trust you and want to believe this wild tale I'll go with you right now and see what you have to show me."

They left the chrome and glass tower and descended into the core of Heliopolis, deep into its rotten core that centered on Transite street. Fumes of forbidden drugs drifted out into the streets from behind shuttered doors and windows; loud, drunken laughter and shrill voices spilled out even in midafternoon. Roal knew they must have passed a dozen murderers in their walk from the monorail stop to the 800 block Transite Street.

The dingy street looked just as it had the night before, except that daylight was not so kind to the dives and houses as were the vargon bulbs that lit the street at night.

There was Charley's Cafe, and Minna's Bar. The next was—no, it must be the next one.

Roal halted. Beyond Minna's bar was a battered warehouse, a relic of the days when Transite was a commercial street. The Jinx house was the next dive.

Roal swore softly. "It was right here, last night. I swear it was, Chief—and now—there's nothing but that old warehouse."

"Which has been there for thirty years," said Calvin.

"Yeah, I know it now, but last night it just seemed as if the Starhouse belonged there, that it had been there all along. I don't understand it. The Starhouse was here—it couldn't have been moved since last night. Chief, it *was* last night, wasn't it? Didn't I report in yesterday?"

Commander Calvin nodded. "I'm afraid I know exactly what happened, boy. You were on Transite Street, all right. But somehow they slipped you the drug and stole the antidote before you had time to use it. Then they found you were an SBI man and didn't dare kill you, so they dumped you in the desert. All this tale about the Starhouse and the beautiful, wondrous Queen of the Silver Stars is exactly the same tale that you yourself have heard from a thousand starmen. You ought to know that it was only induced by the drug."

For a moment Roal felt as if his mind were tottering. What if Commander Calvin were right and all this were merely the result of an actual dose of *harmeena*? He tried to think back, to retrace the events prior to the time he had gone into the Starhouse. But he could remember nothing except that he had gone directly from his hotel room for a walk along Transite to see what business for the SBI might be turned up. And the Starhouse had turned up right where this warehouse now stood. He would stake his life and reputation on it.

He whirled suddenly on Calvin. "I know how I can prove it! That cape I left in your office. Alayna touched it. If we can get her finger prints off it—"

The Commander did not share Roal's enthusiasm, but he patiently returned with Roal to the headquarters of the SBI. His own mind was puzzled and distracted by the mystery of Starhouse. He didn't believe Roal's story, but he didn't quite believe his own, either. He didn't know what to believe.

Roal took the cape into the finger print laboratory. The operating technician examined the collar at the point Roal remembered Alayna grasping it impulsively.

"There're plenty of prints here," said the technician. "Let's see what yours look like."

He examined Roal's fingers minutely, then turned back to the coat. "There are some here that aren't yours, all right. Want pictures?"

Roal nodded. Calvin said, "It won't matter. Dozens of prints besides yours might be there."

"Not in that exact place unless someone had fastened my cape about his neck. And no one else had done that except—"

The Commander raised his eyebrows. "And how does it happen that this alleged Queen of the Silver Stars had your cape on?"

"Nuts!" Roal knew he was being baited. "Send the prints to the Identification Office and order a report sent direct to my office," he told the technician.

THE report would not be ready until morning. Roal went to the physiological lab for a blood test in the hope his blood might betray the presence of the drug and the antidote. That finished the day. In the morning he had to wait impatiently until ten before the pictures and report came in.

He tore the envelope and read:

Memo to Hartford:

The subject prints are those on one Mariana Sebours. Our files give the following information concerning this person: Age, 23; Race Terrestrial Caucasian; Height 5' 7"; Weight 125 lbs.; Hair, blonde; Eyes, blue . . ."

Detailed measurements, and skin and blood textures followed, but they were not of immediate significance to Roal. The fact was that his cloak bore the prints of someone named Mariana Sebours, and unless she and Alayna were the same he didn't know how the prints came to be there. This proved at least that his story was not the fiction or dream that Calvin assumed it was.

Roal considered showing the report to the Commander, but there was more to be done. The descriptive picture in the report fitted his memory of Alayna, but a photo-

graph would tell him for certain. He called the Identification Office for a full report with pictures on Mariana Sebours.

It came through on the televisé about an hour later. He was waiting for it.

"Hello, Roal?" said Tim Atkins, the identification clerk.

"Yes. What do you have?"

"I hope your interest in the Sebours girl is personal, rather than business."

"Why?"

"Well, from her photos she'd be something worth having a personal interest in. Except that she seems to have vanished."

"Give me the whole story. Where's the pix?"

"Coming up. Here you are. Mariana Sebours was born in the United States. Her father is of French-Greek extraction and her mother was American. Mariana herself had notable singing talent and made an operatic debut at sixteen. She went up fast, but always seemed to stop short of the top. For six years she was featured in opera houses throughout the system, and did much concert work. She was listed with the Brooks Agency here in Helio, but they haven't carried her on their books for more than two years. She did a lot of concert work and was last known in New York. Then there just isn't any more of Mariana Sebours."

"What do you mean, there isn't any more? The records should carry the last movement from place of residence. Everyone has to file that information."

"That's just it. No transfer notice from New York was filed. The last address has no record of her for over eighteen months. She's gone, vanished, disappeared."

"All right. I'll wait for the pictures. You may have to do some footwork on this case for me, so don't forget Mariana Sebours."

Even as Roal hung up the door opened and the messenger arrived with the pictures. Roal ripped open the envelope and the prints spilled out. Glossy, glamorous shots of a blonde opera diva slipped out onto the desk. And one look told Roal what he wanted to know.

Mariana Sebours was Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, and her fingerprints were on his cloak. His dream was not a dream. It was cold reality. Except—

Where was the phantom tavern, Star-house?

IV

ROAL SENT A WORK SHEET down to Tim Atkins, but he started on the case independently. He would show Calvin something yet.

Harry Brooks was the nearest and most accessible lead, so Roal made a call at Brooks' office. Harry shifted his cigar as Roal entered. He lurched heavily to his feet. "Hi, there, Hawkshaw. It's been a long time since you've searched for crooks in my bailiwick. Who's done what, and when?"

"Hello, Harry." Roal sat down, refusing one of the black stogies. "I'm not sure what has been done or who has done it, but I want to know about a girl named Mariana Sebours."

"Mariana—" Brooks' eyes suddenly became starry. He blew a kiss to the winds, and stared far away. "Mariana. I'd give you ten thousand dollars if you could tell me where she is today. What a wonderful girl was Mariana. It was only that tiny fault in her voice that kept her from reaching the peaks that should have been hers, but it could be cured now. The doctors have told me—I think that must have been what discouraged her and caused her to abandon her career at its height. That and the ape she called her father."

"What was the matter with her throat?"

"Just some defect in her voice box. She had it worked on, but it didn't improve. It could be fixed now. Only an expert could detect the fault. She was a girl of exquisite beauty and talent. But, more than that, she was a great woman, was Mariana Sebours."

"Was she ever married?"

"No."

"Boy friends?"

"That's the one peculiar thing about her. After she became about eighteen and men really began to take an amorous interest in her she gave them all a cold shoulder. I asked her about it once, and she got in a terrible rage. She blurted out something about not being fit to think of men and marriage. I never found out what she meant by it. We never spoke of it again."

"Hereditary stain of some kind?"

"I don't know what it could have been. Her mother was a charming woman like herself. Her father was a healthy ape-like

cuss. An anthropologist, but perfectly straightforward and normal. Mariana, however, developed a strange attachment for him that in itself was perhaps abnormal. She would never appear towards the last of her career unless he was present and many times she cancelled engagements because Sebours would not be in the same city. Finally, she gave up appearances altogether—in order to stay with him, perhaps. I don't know."

"Did it seem like a psychological abnormality?"

"I'm not qualified to say, but it seemed to me that she was afraid of something happening to him. Perhaps that was abnormal. I don't know."

"What was her father like?"

"I think I have an old snapshot of Mariana and him somewhere here."

Harry Brooks got up heavily and began rummaging through a file drawer. "Yeah, here it is."

Roal took the snapshot. It was small and not very good, but the identity of the man beside Mariana was unmistakable.

It was the giant who had appeared in the doorway of the room at Starhouse.

Roal took the picture back to the office with him and called in Ralph Bowen, a slender young artist who was head of the art department of Heliopolis SBI.

"Think you can do some front views and profiles of this gent from this snapshot," said Roal. "It's not much to go on, but I've seen him and can go along with you and give you descriptions of his features."

Bowen nodded, "I think so. If it doesn't come out the way you think it should look, I can touch it up to your specifications. The big boy done something?"

"I wish I knew," said Roal.

Roal found it necessary to spend the rest of the day with Bowen, coaching him from his memory of that fleeting glimpse of Sebours in the Starhouse. In the late afternoon the drawings were finished to Roal's satisfaction, however.

"I'll want them reproduced," he said. "Distribution is to be made to every operator in the system, but first to those on Mars. I'll issue the necessary orders tomorrow if you can have the reproductions by then."

"First thing in the morning," promised Bowen.

IN THE dimming Martian sunset Roal Hartford watched the city below. Somewhere in its depths was the phantom tavern Starhouse, and tonight there would be new spacemen lured to the drug *harmeena* by the golden-haired Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars. A queen whose heart revolted at the role she was forced to play—Roal was sure.

But who or what was forcing her into it? Her father? Roal felt that he must be, but it appeared as if Sebours was the master mind behind the whole dope gang. And, as yet, no explanation of the mysterious, elusive location of the Starhouse appeared.

Roal had presented all his findings to Commander Calvin but the head of the department was still not certain that Roal had not been drugged and had dreamed up the story of Starhouse and Alayna. It was easy, he had said, to think that Roal's drugged mind would quickly associate the mythical Alayna with the first picture of a beautiful girl that he encountered. The fingerprints he dismissed as having come from a visit to one of the dives. Probably Mariana Sebours was a waitress or dancer in one of them and had accidentally picked up the investigator's cape.

Lacking support of the Chief, then, Roal was forced entirely upon his own initiative. And that had about run out. He had the forces of the SBI working to bring in Mariana and her father, but he had little faith that they would be found.

Somehow he had to get back to Starhouse, the phantom tavern. He knew it was real, that it existed somewhere, but why he could not find it after having walked once directly to its doors was something he could not fathom. He knew he had not been drunk or drugged when he entered the place.

And through all the mystery there floated the husky, plaintive voice of Alayna with the golden hair. Should he never see her again, Roal knew that her song and her loveliness would haunt him for the rest of his life. But, somewhere, somehow, he would find her.

As the darkness grew and it became increasingly difficult to make out objects in the room the televisé flashed its light and rang shrilly in the silence.

He flicked it on. "Hartford speaking."
"Roal Hartford! Please help me. Come to Starhouse tonight on Transite Street. I need your aid. Be careful. You are known."

"Who are you?" Roal burst out. The screen had remained blank.

"I am Alayna, I—"

The soft, golden voice was suddenly cut off with a shrill exclamation. And then there was no more. Cursing, Roal switched off. There was no way of telling now where the call came from.

He called three of his agents, Sims, Parkhurst, and Riley, ordering them to the address on Transite street. He donned his cape and checked his flame lance. No need for disguise now. Alayna had said that he was known.

But by whom? That was the question. Obviously a break must have come between Alayna and those who held power over her, and Roal had not a doubt that she was in danger of her life at this very moment. And there was nothing he could do except go to Transite Street and hope that by some magic the Starhouse would again be there.

HE drove swiftly through the brightening streets. But it was fifteen minutes before he arrived. The agents were already there lounging carelessly across the street from the address he had directed them to.

"I hope we didn't muff it, Captain, but I can't see anything here," said Parkhurst.

Roal stared along the length of Transite Street. There was no Starhouse with the garish crimson sign he remembered. But the old abandoned warehouse was still where it had always been—where he would have sworn Starhouse should have been.

Roal began to question his own sanity. Surely he could not be so wrong about it as this indicated. He knew he had received the phone call, but he couldn't be too sure it was Alayna's voice because the narrow circuits stripped away most of the golden overtones that made her voice a sound of such exquisite beauty.

Or someone might be playing a colossal joke on him. He didn't know—except he knew that somehow he had failed.

He circled the block, directing the deputies to cover adjacent squares. When they

finally met again in front of the old warehouse full blackness had settled over Heliopolis and all the blaze of its million lights boiled skyward into the blackness of space.

"It must have been a bum steer," said Roal, "There's nothing more that we can do tonight. I'll check up on my information and let you know."

"O.K., Captain," said Parkhurst dubiously. His manner made it evident that they wondered if Roal were off the track a bit. He had never appeared so fumblingly on an investigation before.

When they were gone, Roal circled the block once again and then walked up and down the length of Transite amid the glare of the signs and the roaring bedlam of the street of crime.

There was simply no Starhouse. It was maddening to know he had followed this very path right to its door. He knew it was no illusion or drug-inspired dream. But it did not lead to Starhouse now.

Alayna was in deadly danger, and he knew of no way to find her or help her.

He was about to turn about and return to his office for a futile check on the progress being made by the Identification Office, when a thought formed in his mind. There was yet one clue that he had not exploited—a clue that stuck out so close to his face that he hadn't seen it.

The Martians—the Martians who had stolen the pellet of *harmeena* from him on the desert. They were in contact with the dope peddlers of Starhouse.

He raced to the nearest televis booth and called Commander Calvin's home. But as the signal rang at the other end of the line Roal slowly replaced the receiver.

He knew what Calvin's reaction would be. A hundred years of strict peace with the Martians could not be violated by forceful entry into one of the burrows. Calvin would never consent to that, especially since he believed that the whole mystery was only a pipe dream in Roal's mind anyway.

Roal abandoned the call and placed another one. In a moment he got an answer.

"Hello, Shorty," he said. "Do you feel like a job tonight?"

"Sure, if it's a shooting job. I haven't had any excitement for a long time."

"I'm serious, Shorty, and it may turn

out to be a shooting job. Bring along your lance."

Shorty sobered. "Sure, Cap. When and where?"

"Right now. I want you to take me out to the desert to the same spot where you picked me up the other day. I want to visit again that Martian burrow located there."

"Waaait a minute. If this is a shooting job, are you visiting or invading?"

"I'm going in that hole again. Anyway I have to get there. We're on our own. Calvin knows nothing of it. If my hunch is wrong this will cost us our ranks, jobs, and probably land us in the pen. But I'm going and I need you badly. Are you with me?"

Shorty answered, "I'm with you, Roal. Your hunches have always been right with me."

V

THE SLIM, TORPEDO SHAPE of the patrol craft rose in a long slant over the glittering Heliolopis. From his logbook Shorty had checked the course taken on the previous trip to the desert. He reset the controls to the same course and carefully watched their speed.

"It won't be too easy to find this place in the dark," he said. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Roal rapidly outlined the situation to him. "There's not a tag end of a clue to hang onto except this burrow," he finished. "And I'm sure that Alayna has been captured for her attempted warning to me. If she's not already dead she hasn't much longer to live, I'm certain, unless we can find a clue to the mystery of Starhouse."

"I can't see how this desert burrow can lead anywhere."

"I'm not expecting much out of it, either, but it's all we have to go on. And we know the Martians are somehow in communication with the dope gang."

"Perhaps not. Maybe they just liked the smell of the stuff and lifted it from you."

Roal made no answer because Shorty suddenly busied himself with piloting the ship to the surface of the desert. He spiraled slowly down until he was as close as possible to the point where he believed the burrow to be.

The ship slid over the sands with a quiet hiss. Roal and Shorty darkened the craft and stepped out onto the dimly-lit sands. The undulating desert was like a frozen sea, trackless and featureless.

"The best way will be to walk in a spiral around the ship and see if we can cross my tracks," said Roal. "There has been very little wind since we were here. They might be visible."

Shorty disagreed, but they separated by about six feet and began walking in a spiral path. As minutes passed and lengthened they wound outward from the ship and the task seemed more hopeless than ever. Long ages of desert living had made the Martians masters of camouflage.

After an hour's search had yielded nothing Roal was nearly ready to admit defeat. "I think we had better go back to the ship and recheck our position."

"It's as close as we can possibly get it. Your tracks are gone, that's all. They wouldn't last more than half a day at the most. But how about this? Here is something that might be worth looking into."

Roal looked at the spot Shorty indicated. A wide, shuffled path in the sand looked as if a herd of sheep had passed that way.

"Fresh, too," said Roal. "Looks as if a whole congregation of Martians had come this way recently."

"Shall we follow it?"

"We may as well. There's a chance it leads to the burrow of Toomar. Burrows are pretty far apart, you know."

The path was obvious because of its freshness, but the tracks were not deep and already the shifting sands were smoothing under the caress of the night wind. In half an hour they would be gone.

All at once they vanished and the sands were smooth as a sheet.

"Here it is," said Shorty. "Their hole must be right here somewhere."

Roal prodded the sands with his foot. After a moment he struck the hard surface of a door over a burrow shaft. He scooped away a spot and pounded forcefully on the stone door.

It echoed dully like the hollowness of a tomb. But after a moment there was a slow motion and the sand slid down as the slab rose.

A withered Martian head poked cautiously above the sand as Roal and Shorty

darted behind the slab. "Who comes?" the Martian whispered.

"We seek Toomar," said Roal.

"Toomar is below. What business have you with him?"

"I was waiting on the desert a few days ago and Toomar was kind enough to offer water in his burrow. But when I emerged I found that someone below had stolen a small white gem from me. I have come to claim the gem."

"We are most sorry that such an unfortunate occurrence should be laid at our door," said the Martian humbly. "Come below. I know nothing of it, but I am sure that none among us was guilty of such a crime. You may make any demands you wish in procuring the gem again. If one of us is guilty, he shall be punished."

So far the Martian's acts were in accord with the habits of his race and the relationship established with Earthmen. But it seemed to Roal that he almost overdid it. The Martian was almost *anxious* to get them into the burrow.

But it was ridiculous, he told himself. He would find nothing here. And the Martian was only trying to avoid trouble.

NEVERTHELESS, the Earthmen's hands strayed to their lances as they descended into the dark depths of the burrow. The narrow shaft was the same as the one he had previously entered, Roal was certain.

A few Martians were sitting against the walls in the first chamber to which they came. The dim light came from phosphorescent stones set into the walls. Despite the air of carelessness which appeared as the Martians' perpetual guise, there was a tension that Roal could not define. It wasn't in their stick-like limbs, nor was it in their dull eyes. But it was in the very air that Roal breathed and he could not help looking about warily.

In a moment the guide returned from his disappearance down a side tunnel. "Toomar comes," he announced.

The Martian who had offered Roal water appeared now and surveyed them. Roal repeated the story of the theft.

"It is indeed a grievous thing," said Toomar sorrowfully. "Come into the lower chambers and we will see all those who were present that day."

Shorty hesitated. "Aren't these—?"

Roal shrugged. He had spent his career in a job where identification of individuals was a critical factor, but he still could not tell if those Martians now sitting about the room were or were not among the group that had been there on his first visit.

Toomar turned back into the passage from which he had come. Roal and Shorty followed closely.

The passage wound with interminable crooks and turns until their sense of direction was hopelessly lost, and still they kept going down. Roal believed they must have gone down five or six hundred feet at least when Toomar finally halted before a closed door.

"In here," he directed.

Roal hesitated, then stepped in as Toomar flung the door open.

In the moment that it took for the scene within the room to crystallize on the retinas of the two Earthmen, Toomar slammed the door and bolted it. And his dry, cracked voice announced, "The Earthmen have come, Master."

Roal and Shorty needed no other invitation to go for their flame lances. Even as their arms whipped up the dry limbs of the Martian's arms pinned Roal's hands. Shorty's lance swung from his hip in a single motion and burned a hole through Toomar's face as Roal hurled the Martian over his shoulder into the faces of the Martians in the room.

His gun up then, Roal still hesitated in the shock of recognition as the man across the room turned from a table to face him. It was the giant Sebours, father of Mariana—Alayna.

A vicious Martian word snarled from his lips as he leaped behind protecting shelves, drawing a gun. Then from doorways on either side, a stream of Martians flowed into the room like a pile of dry sticks on the breast of a wave. But they were like no Martians Roal had ever seen before. There were guns in their hands, spurting lines of flames toward the Earthmen.

"In here!" Roal shouted to Shorty. He leaped through an open door beside him into a sort of storeroom lined with shelves of chemicals and electrical equipment.

They were out of sight of the enemy for an instant and had time to catch a breath

and a glimpse of their surroundings. The place looked like some biological or chemical laboratory. Sebours was dressed in a sterile garb as if about to perform some dissection or operation, they had noted. And he seemed to be in complete charge, for the Martians called him master, and hastened to obey him.

Roal and Shorty stationed themselves on each side of the doorway. As the Martians made futile attempts to burn them down the Earthmen slew them as they appeared in the line of sight. They were safe enough for the moment, but they didn't have time or ammunition enough to kill all the Martians that could attack. It was only a temporary stalemate.

On Roal's side there was a small window, evidently for passing supplies from the storeroom to the laboratory. But it was at right angles to the doorway and did not look out upon the main part of the laboratory. Roal had avoided getting in line with the window, but he glanced towards it hoping to find a means of escape.

Beyond the window was a polished wooden cabinet in which the lights of the room reflected. The cabinet door was half open and moving slowly with the motion of the air in the room. As Roal watched it idly he saw in its polished surface a distorted reflection of the laboratory.

Suddenly, in the reflecting surface, he saw Sebours cautiously leave his place of hiding and warn the Martians to stand guard. Then he returned to the table where he had been working. The swinging door shifted the reflection out of Roal's vision, but in that instant he had seen something that turned him cold.

On the table where Sebours was working lay a still form. A human body graced with a head of golden hair like none that Roal had ever seen. Except once—

Alayna.

HE WISHED the door would swing back. But as if in confirmation of his identification a low cry of terror suddenly shot through the room. And it was Alayna's voice. Roal knew that he could never mistake it.

He called to Shorty in a hoarse whisper. "They've got Alayna out there and that big ape is doing something to her. We've got to rush them."

"We can't. They'd mow us down before we got out the door."

"We can't let him maim her, either. I'm going out. Coming?"

"Don't be a fool!" Shorty pleaded. "We've got to use our brains. You're no good to Alayna dead."

"Yeah, you're right," Roal admitted. "What I just saw out there got me, but—if that window were only facing Sebours—"

"We could burn a hole through the wall. That might be our best bet. You could nail him in the back—provided a Martian didn't poke a lance through and blast your hand off the minute you got it through."

"Yeah, that wouldn't work."

Alayna's scream came once more and her cry of, "Roal, Roal—"

The sound quickened his pulses to maddening pace. So she had learned he was there. That polished door was swinging slowly again in the motion of the air. An inspiration seized Roal. Once he had seen an outlaw perform an incredible feat with a flame lance. If it could be done now—

It was dangerous, but he moved decisively to the window. It was the only way to save Alayna, a reflective shot from that wooden door panel.

He cut the charge of the lance down to a minimum. It would be sure to burn through the wood, but enough of the searing energy might be reflected. It was one of the peculiarities of the flame lance beam that it could be reflected from a wooden surface at a low angle of incidence.

The door panel slowly swung the image of Sebours into Roal's line of sight. He raised the lance. But the image was so distorted in the surface that the figure of Alayna mingled and flowed with that of her father. If the warped door forced the deadly energy a fraction of a degree away from its target Alayna would receive the full reflected blast instead of Sebours.

Roal waited. The door moved, then paused. It was not quite far enough—but it was moving back now in the wrong direction. In another instant it would be too late.

Roal jammed himself against the wall to get the best angle of reflection. The images wobbled and flowed on the uneven surface,

but there was no time to wait for a better reflection.

He pressed the trigger.

A fury of flame leaped out towards the door and burst against it in a bloom of crimson fire. The charred wood that remained refused to tell Roal of the success or failure of his shot.

There was no sound from the laboratory to tell if the shot had hit or missed—or found the wrong target. Only a sudden great silence.

And in that silence Roal plunged out. He could not endure the waiting in ambush longer. He plunged out upon a scene of disaster—for his enemies. Closely following, Shorty came out blasting with his lance.

But the Martians were too dumb-stricken to fight back. They seemed to have lost all their nerve and some had even dropped their guns to the floor. They all faced the table where disaster had befallen them.

Roal saw at once that his daring shot had been successful. Sebours had fallen across Alayna and now he slumped slowly to the floor. The reflected fire of the lance had not been sufficient to burn through him, but rather had enveloped him in horrible consuming fire. His death had not been pretty and he had died over the bound form of his daughter.

Roal grabbed a scalpel and slashed at the bonds holding the girl to the table. Weakly, she rose and her eyes were filled with tears and thanksgiving.

"I couldn't believe you'd get here," she said weakly.

Roal looked down at the dead body of her father. "I'm sorry—about him," he said.

"It is no matter," said Alayna. "That is sorrow that is long gone. But come with me quickly. We must get out of here. The Thousand Minds will know of what has happened and we simply must attack them first."

Roal was bewildered by her words, but she gave him no time for questions. Clad in her filmy costume as if prepared for appearance in the Starhouse, Alayna jumped lightly to the floor and ran between the stupefied Martians held at bay by Shorty.

The Earthmen followed into a passage and barred the doorway. Then Alayna

directed them to burn down the roof and the walls with the flame lances, sealing the passage completely.

As fleet as a patrol ship, Alayna darted down the passage ahead of them, making it difficult for Roal and Shorty to follow the winding tunnel beneath the desert sands. Their flame lances were kept ready, but no Martians appeared.

After a long time of breathless running through the passage ways, Alayna finally halted beside a small chamber.

Her breath came in gasps. "We can rest here for a moment," she said. "We'll be safe for a little while, I think."

She flung herself upon the floor as Roal and Shorty followed her in. Shorty stood guard at the door, but Roal sat down beside her, his eyes tasting the exquisite beauty and tender loveliness of her.

AFTER a moment she rose to a sitting position, breathing more easily. "I suppose you wonder what this is all about?" she said.

"You read my mind on that," said Roal.

She took a deep breath. "My real name is Mariana Sebours," she said. "Perhaps you knew of me as a concert singer—"

"I looked up your record. Brooks gave me your story. I know that it was your father that I killed back there. I'm sorry, but there was no other way."

"Don't worry about him," said Mariana. "They killed him long ago only he wasn't actually dead. I'm thankful that the end came for him at last."

"Who are they?"

"The Martians. They are planning to rid the planet of Earthmen and conquer Earth in revenge for what Earth had done to Mars."

"But what have we done? I thought everything was serene and peaceful between us!"

"No. If you recall, history speaks of the Martians of a centry ago as being much different from those around us now. They were not the skinny, dried-out creatures they are now. We have done that to them. Once they were as robust and healthy as we. We have made them what they are and forced them into burrows beneath the desert in order to exist."

"But how?"

"Merely by being here. My father made

a long study of the cause and determined that our two races are simply incompatible. The infinitesimal, almost imperceptible radiations that have long been known to emanate from human beings are nearly lethal to the Martians. They produce the dessication that we see.

"As a result of his work my father was filled with a tremendous sympathy for the Martians and resolved to find a way out of the dilemma. It occupied years of his life, but he found no way.

"On the other hand, the Martians themselves found a way to defeat Earth and extract revenge. They discovered *har-meena*. I suppose I don't need to tell you about its effects, but what you know are only the surface effects. You don't understand the long-range results of use of the drug."

"What are they? The initial effects are bad enough."

"It is in the second generation of addicts that the true results appear. The children of anyone who has used *har-meena* a single time and obtained the full effect of it will have minds distorted so that the can be made subject to the telepathic controls of the Martians.

"The Martians are an old race, and time means nothing to them. For a century they have placidly carried on business and social life with us, all the time secretly planning to destroy us when the time was right and a weapon could be found. Now they have begun. *Har-meena* is being introduced into the lowest level of our society, but it will be carried to the highest levels if their plans are fulfilled. And then, in another century, perhaps, they will be ready to strike the final blow and take over Earth. All Earth will eventually become enslaved to the Thousand Minds when those who are robots under Martian control are finally directed to kill off all those who aren't."

"These Thousand Minds—the SBI has heard rumors using that term, but nothing concrete has ever come to our attention."

"The Thousand Minds are the secret ruling body of the Martians. The premier accepted by Earth is only a puppet. By mental control, the Thousand Minds are in direct contact with every Martian on the planet and it is they who are most expert in the science of mind control."

"What is the secret of the phantom

tavern, Starhouse? Is it only an illusion?"

"The phantom tavern actually exists. I will take you there in a moment. Through their mental powers, the Thousand Minds can project an image of the Starhouse to any point on the planet, and when a person enters the door of that projected image of Starhouse, he is actually transported here beneath the desert by the power of the Thousand Minds."

Roal whistled softly. "So that is the explanation of the phantom tavern. It seems incredible that such power exists. But what of your father's part in this plot—and yours?"

THE QUEEN of the Silver Stars hung her head for a moment, then looked frankly into Roal's eyes. "My first concern was to save my father from death and injury at the hands of the Martians. Perhaps I was selfish in this. But, secondly, he was the one man in the system who knew more about them than anyone else in the world. If anyone could know their vulnerable spots it was he.

"So I stayed with him as closely as possible during this long association with the Martians. He was so incensed by the thing that Earthmen are doing to the Martians that he even fell in with their plan to destroy through the drug. He knew that an appeal to Earth powers and governments would be futile. Commercial interests would not allow the withdrawal of Earthmen from Mars. He knew better than to ask for that."

"I gave up my career and came to Starhouse. It was a vicious, horrible existence, but I stayed to try to protect him and to persuade him to try to bring about a peaceful solution to the problem. I thought if this could eventually be done it would atone for the crimes I've committed in persuading men to use the drug.

"Now I know that I was wrong. For my father turned more and more against Earthmen and beat and lashed me at times when I tried to persuade him against his course of action. At last I gave up altogether and called you. The Thousand Minds knew of it, of course, and ordered me reduced to the status that my father had been in for so long."

"What was that?" Roal asked. "What was going to be done to you?"

"They told me then that long ago they had performed an operation on my father and it made him the same as if his parents had been *harmeen*a addicts. His brain was totally under the control of the Thousand Minds. That was the reason I could not prevail against him. But at the same time he was aware of the wrong that he was doing to his countrymen and to me. He lived for years in a mental hell of torment. That is why I'm glad he is gone. There is peace for him now. But the Thousand Minds were forcing him to perform the operation on me."

"You see, he had become a great figure to the common people among the Martians. He symbolized their hidden revolt. Hardly any knew of the actual persons in the group of the Thousand Minds, but my father was their emissary to the people. To them he was the symbol of all that the Thousand were doing. That is why his death so demoralized those in the laboratory. It was as if their whole revolution were suddenly tumbling down."

When Alayna finished she was trembling as if with cold. Roal reached to his own shoulders and placed his cape about her. She looked up at him. "Thank you. Did you ever wonder why it was that I tried to warn you against the drug when you first came to Starhouse. It was because of the cape. It was the first true kindness that any man had shown me for so long that it made me want to cry."

Roal thought he understood, but he said, "There have been plenty to admire you in Starhouse."

Alayna shuddered. "The things I see in their eyes are not admiration."

Shorty had not relaxed his guard at the doorway, though he had strained to hear the words of Alayna's story. Now he gave a warning. "Martians down the passage. They act like they're on a hunt. We'd better move!"

VI

ALAYNA ROSE and then hesitated as if in indecision. "The only way to wipe out the Martian plot is to destroy the Thousand Minds and do it now. If we fail to attack now, it will give them a respite to re-establish themselves and our hopes will be lost."

"But there are only the three of us and two weapons," said Roal. "We cannot attack a thousand Martians with such powers as you say they have. We'll have to be concerned merely with escape now, and attack later."

"You'll never find the Thousand Minds again, if you fail to follow through now," said Alayna. "Would you attack if I could get you a hundred armed spacemen?"

"With a third that many I'd attack, but where can you find them? Surely not in the desert."

"Follow me."

The Queen of the Silver Stars stepped to the opening in the chamber and glanced down. "It's too late to go that way. We'll have to use the old air tunnel."

She came back into the room and approached an opening on the other side so small that the two men had not noticed it.

"I can squeeze though. If you can follow me we can get out through here."

Roal considered the width of his shoulders dubiously. "We can try."

He assisted Alayna into the narrow opening after she again discarded the cape which hampered her movement. Shorty followed. He was of small build, not very much larger than Alayna. Finally Roal wormed his own way into it, thankful he was not bothered by claustrophobia.

He lay on his side with one arm extended forward, the other down towards the mouth of the tube. This made it possible to guard the entrance with the flame lance.

It was stifling hot in the tube, and dust rose to choke them as the result of their struggles. Roal assumed Alayna was making good progress. And Shorty seemed to be having no trouble but he was creeping forward by painful inches.

The opening was visible as a dim spot of light beyond his feet, but suddenly that spot of light wavered and darkened. Someone had passed before it. Roal stopped moving and stared down. It wasn't merely someone standing before the opening. A Martian was bending forward, looking into it. And Roal caught the glimmer of light on a gun as it was aimed down the tube towards him.

Quickly, he squeezed the trigger of his own lance at full power. A dozen bursts of flame plunged down the length of the air tube. The first one toppled the Martian

in the mouth of the tube. Successive shots bit into the roof and walls near the mouth. A hiss of melting sand turned into a roar as the tube collapsed behind them. Waves of choking dust smothered them and threw them into coughing spasms.

Alayna gave a frantic cry of alarm and Shorty tried to squirm about to see what had happened. Roal explained to them. "And it means there's only one way to go, now—forward. Is there any chance of them cutting us off, Alayna?"

"Plenty. It all depends on how many controls the Thousand Minds may have near the other end. Fortunately, the main controls were there in the lab with my father and you killed many of them. But we'll soon be through. I'll try to go faster."

Roal could have said that she needn't hurry on his account. Already Shorty was a considerable distance ahead of him, and Alayna was probably much farther by the sound of her voice.

They were silent then until Alayna called that she had finally dropped into a chamber opening from the tube. Roal increased his struggles, but Shorty was out long before he was.

When he emerged, a gasp of recognition came to his lips. It was one of the dream rooms of Starhouse.

Alayna nodded as she saw Roal's eyes widen. "This is Starhouse," she said. "Follow me as if you were merely spacemen visiting here for dreams."

She led them into the hall outside. The noise of the tavern increased as they approached the main room. "Wait beside the door," Alayna asked.

Roal opened his mouth to question, but she was gone before he could speak. Spacemen looked up suddenly as she appeared in their midst, and the room became quiet as if Alayna carried an advancing wave of silence with her.

She took up her position on the little dais beside the old piano and nodded to the bleary-eyed player. And then her song began. With it came again that magic spell that Roal could hardly fight off. He wondered if it were entirely the song of Alayna or if the mighty power of the Thousand Minds were seizing the spell of her song, weaving, intensifying it until it called out to him to flee back to Earth and blue skies

and green fields—to find someone like Alayna—to take Alayna with him.

And he knew within himself that the Thousand Minds had nothing to do with that dream. It was the dream of all spacemen who spend long years amid the cold and blackness of space and the wasteland of alien planets. Their dreams, concentrated and distilled to their strongest essence, flowed forth upon the low, husky notes from the throat of Alayna.

She sang of a sweetheart who waited for the return of a spaceman, and to each man in the room Alayna was the sweetheart and he was the one for whom she waited.

HER SONG ended and the spotlight upon her shifted from the warm pink glow to a sunny blue. She stood there watching them, keeping their eyes upon her.

Then she said, "Spacemen, what would you do for Alayna?"

There was a moment of silence. Strange, rash promises surged upon the lips of hardened spacemen who thought this was only more of the illusions of Alayna and hesitated.

"Would you fight for Alayna?" she said. "Would you fight for that green Earth with the blue skies?"

"Our guns would be yours, if you needed them," someone said fervently.

"I need them—every one of them, spacemen. At this moment, in the tunnels beyond Starhouse, the Martians are gathered. They are attacking Earthmen and seek to drive you from this planet. If they can be subdued quickly, the rebellion may end. If not, we are doomed, and all Earth with us."

The silence was charged, then a dozen men leaped up at once. "Show us where they are. We'll kill the dirty—"

"You are fighting men, not a mob," Alayna warned. "Ready your lances and follow me."

Swiftly, like a wraith of light she ran from the dais to the doorway where Roal and Shorty waited. "Here are your men, a hundred and more. I'll show you the chamber of the Thousand Minds."

Roal nodded. "We're with you."

He ran behind her, letting her remain far enough in the lead so that she was like an elusive, darting dream inspiring the

cursing spacemen who roared out of the tavern room in a surging tide. Most of them were in poor shape as fighting men, Roal knew. Their minds were sodden with drink and some with *harmeena*, perhaps. But each represented a gun that could be turned against the Thousand Minds.

The passage turned abruptly at right angles into a darkened corridor. Something was wrong in that corridor, Roal knew instantly. He knew it should not be black. He sensed that the light tubes were still illuminated. The farther they went, however, the more dense the blackness became. It was like a living, smothering essence that enveloped them and cloaked their souls.

Roal heard sounds of dismay from the spacemen behind. There were murmurings against going further.

"Alayna is in there!" Roal shouted.

At that moment there came the sound of her voice raised again in the song that she had sung in the tavern. Its dream of life and hope buoyed them on into the blind darkness.

What the blackness could be Roal could not guess. It was not merely absence of light. There was light coming from the tubes, but this blackness literally consumed all light before it reached the eyes.

That it was a manifestation of the Thousand Minds he did not doubt, but it did not seem to be harmful—at least so far.

Then abruptly the blackness exploded into light—searing, livid radiance that stabbed their eyes with even greater blindness. Roal flung an arm before his eyes and halted before that radiance. There was no heat, but the light was the very antithesis of the darkness that had gone before.

Yet amid the hoarse exclamations and angry cries of the spacemen the song of Alayna still persisted, urging them forward in the face of that radiant wall.

For it was a wall, Roal saw behind the shield of his arm. It was close to them. Alayna was standing before it as he came up to her.

"This is the doorway leading into the chamber. Beyond is the assembly of the Thousand Minds. Blast through the door and kill!"

Roal found the edge of the door and the handle. He placed the flame lance against it and as he pressed the trigger the door handle suddenly became a living,

writhing snake in his grasp. An involuntary exclamation escaped his lips as he dropped the snake and released the trigger of the lance.

He tried again and found he had the point of the lance pressed against the back of Alayna as she stood flattened against the door.

"Press the trigger, quickly," her voice said. "It's only a trick of the Thousand Minds."

His head whirled. There was Alayna standing beside him. "I'm real," she said. She touched his arm to prove it.

He pressed the trigger against the image before him. Slowly the stuff of the door melted away in a mass that dropped to the floor and became great, writhing snakes. Each drop split into a thousand droplets and each became a thousand tiny snakes that writhed and swelled. They flowed back towards the crowd of spacemen in a streaming mass. Flame lances turned upon them to burn them down. Flames that made no impression upon the flood of serpents—but which found their marks in other spacemen. A dozen men went down before Alayna's voice reached them.

"Don't shoot! It's a Martian trick. These aren't real. You'll only kill each other. Now—look! The door is opening. There are our enemies. The Thousand Minds. Kill them all! Let none escape!"

THE DOOR flung back under the force of Roal's and Shorty's push. They rushed in beside Alayna and found themselves on a ten-foot balcony overlooking tiers of seats arranged in concentric circles. There were enough of them to be a thousand, Roal thought. In each seat was an immobile, withered Martian. The entrance of the Earthmen caused no stir of movement among the Martians. They sat as if dead, but Roal sensed the tremendous, concentrated mental power of that immobile assembly—mental power that could conjure up the powers of darkness and of light which they had seen, and the flood of writhing serpents.

Roal raised his flame lance to turn it on the Martians. A sense of revulsion at such an attack upon the seemingly helpless creatures assailed him, but he knew they were far from helpless. And their purpose was deadly to Earthmen.

Before he could pull the trigger, a dozen Alaynas appeared beside him. Scores were in his line of sight. Those standing in the air before him were not real, he knew, but of those beside him he could not tell the difference between Alayna and the mental creations of the Thousand Minds. But one of them grasped his arm tightly.

"I'm real," she said. "Fire quickly."

He poured flame into the midst of the assembly. Behind him the other spacemen were pouring onto the balcony. Many of them, drunken, thought the visions that beset them were creations of their own minds and fired wildly.

The total effect was marked. Below, tens of Martians withered and died in the blast. But those who were left bent their mighty power of their minds to new creations of horror. As the Earthmen watched, there grew in the air over the assembly a monstrous head that swelled until it threatened to fill the whole space of the chamber. A hundred gaping mouths breathed out smoke and tongues of flame that licked hungrily towards the spacemen.

It was a harmless, unreal creation, thought Roal. He moved near to it, planning to fire through the monster into the assembly. But one of those flame tongues lashed out and flung itself about him. He cried out involuntarily at the unexpected pain.

The thing was far from harmless. The fire of those tongues burned with untold agony. A score of the others must have felt it, too, for their cries of alarm spread through the chamber. One by one they began to fall back, retreating towards the passage as the head swelled.

Alayna tugged at Roal's arm. "Down! Over the edge of the balcony before the head swells and fills the chamber. Get down into the midst of them!"

Roal saw she was right. He called hoarsely to the spacemen, who turned at his beckoning. He grasped the edge of the railing and leaped over as a tongue of flame reached for him.

Alayna called. "Follow him! It's the only way!"

Her voice was still magic to them and with shouts of fury they began leaping over to the floor below, scrambling over in a circle that spread about the seated Martians.

The Martians still did not move a muscle. They remained as if carved from stone, even as Roal poured his deadly flames into them.

He looked up to see what had become of Alayna. He thought that she had followed. But she remained there on the balcony, a symbol to urge the spacemen over its edge. Now that they had almost all come, she was nearly alone, and the fury of the monstrous head seemed to be turned on her alone.

Roal gave a hoarse cry. "Alayna! Jump!"

She saw the threatening tongue of fire too late. It was as if the fire of all the other tongues had combined in one. It covered her from head to foot.

Every spaceman in the chamber ceased firing and stared at the horror of her plight. Her screams rang through the chamber as she was lifted from the balcony and hurled into the air only to fall into the midst of a great, devouring maw that appeared in the side of the head. It closed over her, and the sound of the voice of golden haired Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars was heard no more.

As she vanished from their sight the spacemen turned the unleashed fury of their very souls upon the Martians. How long Alayna could live within that horror hanging in the air above them, they did not know, but they knew the thing would vanish only with the last of the Martians.

With wild cries they leaped upon the seated creatures stabbing, burning, slashing a frenzy of killing and slaughter.

As for Roal, his own fury congealed into a single bright purpose beside which all else dimmed into insignificance. He selected a path from the outer circle to the center of the assembly and slowly blasted his way forward. A thousand ghastly mental creations of the Martians now beset them. Great lizards slashing with fanged teeth, enormous slugs that dropped from above and encased them in suffocating slime.

But Roal gradually found himself in possession of a defense against them. He observed that if he gave way to fright and fear at their presence they were able to attack him. But those that came up without his awareness produced no effect until he saw them and let a moment's anxiety sweep over him. Then he felt the pain of their

stabs. That was what had happened on the balcony.

"Shorty," he called to the patrol pilot who was fighting beside him. "It's only your imagination. Don't believe in the thing and it can't hurt you!"

Shorty was down on his back slashing vainly to get from under an enormous blob of living slime that was sucking the life from him. Shorty's own fear gave the thing life.

"Shorty. It's gone. There's only a blanket over your head."

For an instant, Shorty appeared, "Yeah?" Then the thing came back as his imagination powered it again.

BUT he had seen enough to know what Roal meant. He rose with the thing still about him and slashed out towards the Martians with his lance as if the slug weren't there. Gradually it vanished and he walked forward unhindered.

"We've got it!" he exclaimed. "They can't hurt us if we won't believe in them!"

"Right!" said Roal. "These are created by the Thousand Minds, but they are powered by our own! Let's get these devils!"

Shorty looked up. "The head is shrinking. We must be making headway."

Roal glanced up hopefully. Alayna was familiar with these things. She must know the secret of their vulnerability. If that were the case, then perhaps she still lived unharmed within the mass of force and tenuous substance that formed the monster.

But if that were true, he wondered why it had been able to attack her at all. Perhaps it was because it represented the mightiest efforts of the Martians, or she had allowed a moment's fright to enter her mind.

The monster head was dwindling fast as the mental forces of the remaining Martians was insufficient to support it. The thing shrank and dropped down to the floor. Less than a hundred of the dry Martians remained and they were vanishing rapidly in the flames of the remaining starmen.

Then abruptly, the head was gone, and from out of that mass of horror fell the unconscious form of Alayna. The few remaining Martians came to life. They leaped from their seats and began running—

straight into the flames of the starmen where they died.

Amid the shambles Roal slowly and tenderly lifted Alayna in his arms. She was miraculously alive and apparently unharmed. Her own knowledge of the monster and her refusal to believe in its ability to harm her had saved her life.

Within an hour a dozen SBI guards arrived at Roal's call. Then Shorty let Roal have the patrol ship to take Alayna to Heliopolis. Calvin exploded all over the place when he arrived. But his wrath finally died to a stammer as the truth was unfolded to him.

In the small patrol ship, Alayna sat beside Roal watching the sunrise on the desert. Her eyes were dew-bright and she seemed at once glad and shy.

"I've found out one thing that made me glad," she said.

"What's that?"

"My father was not a dope addict as I had believed. The Martians could never force it upon him and so they had to change his brain instead. I know that what I did was not under compulsion of the Thousand Minds."

Roal smiled down at her. She must be reading his thoughts, he supposed. "Your father was a great man," he said. "He tried to solve a problem that the human race has muffed for ten thousand years, the problem of how to make it possible for incompatible races to live together."

"Perhaps he accomplished something. This conflict will bring the problem to light. I think Earth will find a solution."

"The Martians will go the way of the Indian. Perhaps we may eventually find some worthless, barren planet and put a few hundred of them there on a reservation. But the problem is as old as man. There can be no solution. The strong overcomes the weak and man calls it progress."

"Some day there'll be a solution."

"You're a dreamer like your father. Don't ever lose sight of your dreams. That's the only thing that makes life worth while."

"Dreams sometimes come true, don't they?"

Roal drew her tight, drinking in her loveliness with his eyes. "I think mine is going to," he said slowly.

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on two of the cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish PLANET STORIES. They need no introduction to you, unless you're new to PS's pages—in which case step right up and meet Gardner F. Fox and Raymond F. Jones, both of whom have stories in this issue.

Who stole it?

That's what I want to know! One minute I'm myself, and the next thing I know my head is resting in the trophy room of PLANET STORIES, staring down on incredible B. E. M.'s, spaceships, lovely gals, prognathous-jawed heroes, solar guns—let's go back to the lovely gals.

Anyhow, I'm talking about that head of mine that the Editor has on his trophy room shelf. Boy, what a marvelous excuse for being dumb. You spend your life trying to get ahead, and then they swipe it on you! Only trouble is, people say that, off me, it looks good.

It is night. The trophy room is silent save for the gurgle of a purple-eyed B. E. M. drooling over a toothsome morsel . . . somewhere my latest heroine is screaming with laughter (at my head) . . . I open my eyes to give her a dirty look and—

Whadda ya know! I knew I'd get back to the lovely gals. It's the Spirit of the Vizigraph herself, clutching a beam-recorder and wearing the very latest in Venusilk, Moonylons, and the snappiest Deneblouse you ever saw. She's even pretty. Hair the color of . . . and eyes that sparkle like . . .

Why should I tell you what she's like? Get the Editor to steal *your* head!

Vizy cajoles me in canal-Martian. I snap back with some pig-Procyon. She wants my autobiography. I say no. She wipes the lipstick off my mouth. I say yes.

I was born in Brooklyn, and still pay for it by being an incurable Dodger fan. Spent my most impressionable years being an insurance runner, soda jerker, reporter—collecting a couple of degrees in college and law school—being a lawyer, and then a writer. I got sidetracked for a while from writing because I was practicing law, but straightened that out by quitting my office and writing. Have never regretted it.

Somewhere along the line I attached a wife and two youngsters to me. Love them dearly except on rainy days when they insist on standing in a semi-circle around my typewriter.

Like sports of all kinds, and books ditto.

I winter in Westchester, working like a dog, and summer on Long Island, trying to loaf like same. My big ambition is to make the Vizigraph gang swoon with delight over one of my yarns. Have made a science-fiction fan out of my Dad. Now if I can do the same thing to my wife—heh! heh! What a fate! I ought to know. I was one a long time ago, and still am.

Vizy looks a little disappointed. I asked her does she expect *Ben Hur* and *For Whom The Bell Tolls* to happen to me? She claims it is an uneventful life. She may be right, but I like it.

—GARDNER F. FOX.

Well, I'm not a fan-letter writer, but I've been on a pretty heavy diet of STF and fantasy for the past nineteen years. Anybody here been around any longer?

It all started that eventful day that I wangled two-bits to buy Hugo Gernsback's old publication carrying "The War of the Worlds." It had the same effect on me then that the broadcast three or four years ago had on the whole country. And when the neighbor kids borrowed some of the magazines they were ordered to bring them back pronto by mothers who looked upon mine with a strange pity in their eyes.

In Junior High, I spent the time in geography classes drawing up engineering specifications for the land, sea, and air contraption described in Jules Verne's "Robur the Conqueror."

Then along in there somewhere I decided to become a radio engineer and at the same time pick up a little easy cash writing some of the fantastic stuff. That led to a case of split personality which hasn't been cured yet.

I hammered along through four years of college, alternating between the school of Engineering and the school of English, trying to find out how to hook words and circuits together. Sometimes the words got where the circuits should have been . . .

That college English was a mistake. If you want to be a writer, never trust a college English prof. Just remember he's *there* because he isn't any good anywhere else—generally speaking.

After the gloss of college began to get knocked off (I mean knocked!) the writing began to improve and get printed now and then. But the radio business wasn't so hot, that being near the end of the Recession. Remember those things? Being married and a family man by then, I required cash in large and steady amounts, so I found a job that wasn't even a fifteenth cousin to anything I'd ever studied, but it was a living.

During the war, however, there came a chance at radio engineering work. At that time I made the discovery that all the industrial plants in the country are located in the most abominable climates on the continent. The doc advised me to get out of the East Coast soup and back to the great open spaces of the Southwest where a guy can dry out once in a while. I became convinced that if the Pilgrims had gone the other way and settled the West and Rocky Mountain country first the Indians would still have everything east of the Mississippi and there'd be no arguments.

When I got back here (Arizona) I added up the few published words of mine and got a total of somewhere around 350,000, which was not much but enough to make me think I might make a go of this. Then I figured out the time spent on it. The pay rate per hour was several times greater than any I could possibly earn in radio engineering or anything else I'd done. The Great Decision was made. I'd be a professional writer. (Well—I could try. *Somebody* must have read the words I'd had published.) Anyway, my shingle is up. If you happen to like this stuff even just a little bit, drop a kind word to the Boss. There's lots more where it came from.

—RAYMOND F. JONES.



THE VIZIGRAPH

This is the Vizigraph—a gathering of acid-throwers, stink-bomb enthusiasts and booby-trap setters (oh, occasionally somebody says something nice, but—you know . . .).

Herein we print letters, if typewritten, double-spaced, on one side—and not too narsty. We delete references to competitors, ancestors of other letter-writers, ordinary politicians, and STFan clubs, activities and collections. The editor, a scrawny stiff, is fair game and is rapidly developing the cornered-rat psychosis. He has been inoculated against rabies, however, so it is safe to bite him.

We also award original illustrations to the writers of the three best letters. This is determined by the votes of other letter-writers and by what the editor wished he'd had for breakfast (so far, there would seem to be a positive correlation between Chad Oliver and soft-boiled eggs). The pix picked are from the issue in which the winning letters appeared.

Incidentally, in this issue three rascals voted for themselves. With our customary high-handedness we threw these votes out and advanced their next choices (when any) one place.

Oliver, of course, gets first choice of one illo (don't ever run for the Presidency, Chad. You'll make it, sure as shooting, and then the fans will assassinate you, sure as sh—). W. R. Ford, you just beat out Coswal for second; pick two, in case Chad names one you like. Coslet, Walter, pick three, in case the Ford and Oliver choices leave you empty-handed.

Hold your fire, boys, until I can wriggle under this desk. . . .
—PLANET'S LINGERING PSYCHOSIS

YES, YOU RETCH—EVERY CONTOUR!

Licking Pike
Newport, Kentucky

DEAR POLYP:

That monicker was your own idea, so not much offense intended. Could it be that you intend to emulate our little tentacled friend? He works exceedingly slow, but his works are mighty. And thou? Well, a minute improvement is noticeable in the heading of the Spring ish. Could it be a hint of mighty reforms to come? Hmmm? There's room, 'deed there is. The gal wasn't sexy enough. If the powers-that-be blindly insist on wimmen on STF-mag covers, let them present us with something worth drooling about.

Bradbury's short was the best of the issue, though there wasn't anything to shout out. Enjoyed McDowell, as usual, and still yearn for the return of the characters he gave us in *The Red Witch of Mercury*. Kind of enjoyed *Distress Signal and Scrambled World* and, now that I think about it, nothing in the ish really disgusted me. But, as I said earlier, there's a lot of room for improvement. Get Fox out of that blood and guts fixation. He's got Walton doing it now. It's getting so I can't look a dish of spaghetti with tomato sauce in the face (a mean trick any day) without hearing the sodden *thunk* of steel plunging into flesh and

the screams and moans of the dying . . . ugh! Pardon me while I retch—for the catsup. Ugh, again.

There were a couple of good pics. Rubimor's two-page spread seemed to have suffered during reproduction, but was best in the issue. I forgive him lack of STFictional content in view of his artistry. Vestal's little job on page 50 was a dramatic thing. His other one was passable.

T'other day I was browsing through a batch of old PLANET's (mine, by the way) and chuckling madly over the Vizigraph in days of yore. Mid yak-yaks and yuk-yuks I lamented that we no longer have the inimitable Gifford and the indomitable Asimov (I won't even say Asenion) with us. Then I read Ford's masterpiece. Ford has written the funniest thing I've seen in many a moon in La Vizi; in fact, it's the equal of anything that ever appeared in La Vizi. Give Ford lots of pics, so he'll write again. Even if I hadn't obtained a modicum of enjoyment from it, *Savage Galahad* would have been worth while because it elicited Ford's outburst.

Ford first. Bradley second. Oliver third. Mebbe, if Oliver could impress me with a line like Bradley did, I would have given him second for his thoughtful letter. My, my, was that the Looney Lad? If the mere threat of a college education could reform him so, just think what a couple of quarters of the real McCoy are going to do to him. He probably won't even deign to pick up a copy of PLANET.

Bradley is up the creek sans paddles. The machine can't work, and he knows it. The square root of .5 is irrational and can only be approximated, although approximated very closely. Taking the square root of Bradley would probably be even more of a problem. Not only does Bradley sound irrational, but he would probably put up strenuous objections to having a root extracted. 'Tis your problem, Polyp.

Take Chad Oliver's comments to heart. Strictly good dope. ". . . and the clinging material revealed every curve and contour of her figure . . ." Every contour? Try it on the cover sometime unless you decide to reform the things.

I don't think your authors are really giving their all nowadays. An awful lot of the stuff has been dashed off in the mad, endless quest for geetis. You need someone who will give his all for the sheer joy of writing and create masterpieces. Beg me, Polyp, beg me.

I guess I've held forth long enough for this time. Sex or science-fiction? To be or not to be? Truth or consequences? I leave you, as I pray gibberingly for the half-breed's death.

Ghu-dbye,

STANLEY C. SKIRVIN

WE ARE SO TOO ENGAGED!

400 Ontario Street,
Wheeling, W. Va.

DEAR ED. AND VIZIFANS:

No doubt many fans are wondering what Poor Little Paul meant in the last issue, when he said, "Shall we tell 'em about the other news, Bill?" It is possible that rumors are flying. If so, pay them no mind. Mr. Payne and I aren't even engaged. It happened something like this:

Operator Payne sits at his huge desk, which is inlaid with small lumps of coal and other rare and valuable gems, and staggers through reams and reams of fan mail, all starting with "Dear Editor:" and ending as if they mean "Dumb Editor!" His face gradually takes on an ex-

pression of mortal anguish. After cringing under thousands of verbal blows in five hundred letters he leaps to his feet, eyes wild, hair flying, and shouting, "Stop the presses! Stop the presses!"

A man pops in the door and stares at the Ed. "Did ya' call, boss? Did ya' hunh? Ya' wanta stop th' presses, hunh? Ya' wanta. Hunh?"

"No," peeps Payne sarcastically. "I just yell that to sound important. Of course, I want the presses stopped! I just discovered that the fans want the cover design changed."

The presses are stopped, a new cover design is made up, the presses are started, Payne sits down, dashes through seven hundred fifty more letters, looks anguished, leaps up, shouts, "Stop the presses! Stop the presses!"

And the man enters, saying, "—call, hunh? Stop—hunh? Hunh?"

"No—yell—look important—and they don't want the cover changed after all!"

So the man exits, the presses are stopped, the old design is used, the presses started, Payne sits down, rushes through a thousand more letters, looks anguished, leaps, shouts, "Stop the presses! Stop the presses! Stop! Stop! When will this stop, it's driving me nuts!"

For a moment he stands swaying upon shaking legs, his mind numb with confusion, and then his eyes alight upon the lower, left-hand drawer of his desk (containing an empty ink bottle, a worn-out ribbon, a chewing gum wrapper, fingernail parings, a manuscript, and two homeless vets) and he suddenly realizes that his troubles are over, anyway, for three months.

He reaches into the drawer containing an empty bottle, a worn-out ribbon, wrapper, parings, manuscript, and two homeless vets, and pulls out the manuscript, waving it in the air.

"Now I know what to do with this manuscript of Oberfeld's," he shouts triumphantly. "With this in the mag, the fans will be so husy climbing Oberfeld's frame that they won't have time to notice whether the cover design is changed or not, so there'll be no more stopping the presses, changing the design, restarting the presses, me sitting down, rushing through letters, looking anguished, leaping, shouting, 'Stop the presses!'"

There you have it. I could have simply said, "I sold one of my yarns to PLANET," but it wouldn't have been nearly as much fun. If it be corn, then make the roast of it. (*Scheduled for the Fall ish, oh ye wolves.—Ed.*)

Now, on to the Spring PLANET. The cover is the best in a long time, even with the angelic smile upon the angry girl's face. The new names-strip, too, is heaps better.

The only gripe I have is on the first illustration for *Rocket Summer*. It is a good piece of artwork, but seems out of place in PLANET because it does not properly convey the atmosphere of fast, colorful action of the story. (Looks like a travel guide.)

I would say the Vizi-we-want-a-bimonthly-PLANET-graph is looking up. (*That's because we're holding a cover-girl above it.—Ed.*) Oh, so that's it!

First place on the letters goes to "sob-sob" Sachs, because, being an ex-serviceman, I feel sorry for sad Sachs. Second, because she talks like that *Savage Gal*-i-had out last night (turn out the fire, Mother, the corn's a-poppin'), Adell Worthen. I am surprised at you, me Worthy. You should have instantly realized that the Kilroy-like gent in *Tepondicon* took the door marked MEN. What else? Third, because he sounds like an old salt, Norton.

Regarding the question thunk up by ye Ed.,

"The square root of Bradley?" It's maybe his head? A machine for determining how many times per second a woman changes her mind he's talking about? Really, old sock, I constructed and tested such a device long ago. It indicated "unchanging," when she wanted a new coat. Unfortunately, I no longer have the device because I tried it on a woman driving a car. It indicated something like 92*-111?? and disintegrated. The square root of $\frac{3}{4}$ was not needed in the device's construction. For years I have been making my one-half square inch baffle plates with a diagonal measurement of exactly one inch, giving exactly half the area of a square inch. Now how about a kissometer? That I will gladly put to test!

Simply yours,

BILL OBERFIELD

THE KENNEDY COVER-REACTION

84 Baker Ave.,
Dover, New Jersey

DEAR EDITOR:

Ahhhh, spring! And in December, no less! The Spring PLANET having infiltrated these hinterlands, I thought I'd knock out a few comments on same.

The new style of lettering on the cover may not be so artistic as that of former issues—but it's more eye-catching, at any rate. Speaking of eye-catching-ness, the fair damsel wielding the smoke-shooter is assuredly enough to electrify any masculine gaze that chanced to be wandering o'er the news-rack. Wow! Can't say I care much for the rest of the cover illustration, but that dame alone is well worth the 20 cents. Who did the cover, by the way? Murphy Anderson? (Allen Anderson—Ed.)

Passing on to the table of contents . . . I am but halfway through *Beyond the Yellow Fog* and have yet to read the Fox and Walton offerings. so will comment on the "six thrilling space-tales" instead.

Rocklynn's *Distress Signal* was like a breath from the good ol' days. To say the least, 'twas refreshingly different. I liked the characterizations of the Wortans—tho' Rocklynn seems to delight in very unmercifully bumping off his alien races. Remember the earlier yarns in the Hallmyer series? Gaw, but them thar aliens just don't stand a chance with us humans around (harmppf—kaff, kaff!).

As far as ideas are concerned, Bradbury's *Rocket Summer* is probably best in the issue. The concept of humanity being socially unprepared for tremendous scientific advances is a theme seldom touched in STF, for some reason. I'll bet, though, that some worshippers at the temple of Almighty Science will pan the subject matter of this yarn.

Chester S. Geier is rapidly becoming a favorite type-pounder of mine. I greatly enjoyed his *Enigma of the City and Environment*, published in other mags, and *Planet of Creation* (presumably his first story for PLANET. (Yes—Ed.) proved up to snuff.

Basil Wells' *Scrambled World* was a deliciously wacky hunk of screwiness.

Final Glory was the only story in the issue that yours truly didn't care for—and even that was acceptable. It looked like something really terrific, at first glance, but the handling seemed somewhat crude. 'Nother thing, the hypothesis that one stinking little rocket ship crashing into the sun could rejuvenate the dying star seems highly improbable.

Atavism, by Erik Fennel (whoever that may be, (Himself—Ed). should be memorable if only because it's the first STF tale I have yet encountered in which Earthlings gobble up the carcass of the visitor from Outer Space. And, to make matters all the more cock-eyed, the Martian has to taste like Spam, yet!

Fie on the illustrations this trip. As somebody very succinctly pointed out in the letter section, there are guys doing better work for the Fiction House comic books. The memorial to H. G. Wells was perhaps the most look-at-able scrawling in the ish.

The Viz seems sadly lacking in red meat this trip. Froth-and-bubbings are nice, but just so much of the "hubba-hubba-drool-drool" school of letter-hacking fills the reader up. W. R. Ford's missive gets my nomination for first—it was really genuinely funny. Give Wheaton second and toss Adell Worthen third. I refuse to vote for Oliver—the guy must have two closetsful of originals now.

Harley Sachs makes a good point about sticking ads in the middle of the fiction pages. But I've got what might be a better idea. Why not have the authors write the advertising copy into the middle of the stories? For instance, while the hero in the cover-novelt is fighting a single-handed battle against a snarling pack of Jovian grulzaks, have him suddenly stop and deliver a two hundred-word soliloquy on Monahan's rupture-supports, or the latest book on spicy stories sent prepaid in plain wrapper for only \$1.98. (*What have the grulzaks ever done to you?—Ed.*) Instead of the hero making ardent love to the Neptunian princess, have him gaze into her eyes and tell her of the marvelous powers of Ajax Bunion Balm. As you can see, the possibilities are endless.

Fortunately, this letter isn't.

Cordially,

JOE KENNEDY

NOTE ON THE TITLE SPECTRUM

865—20th Ave. So.,
St. Petersburg, Fla.

DEAR ED:

I ambled into Cronkeit's Coke Castle with the express purpose of perusing the pulps. Hmmm . . . Gory Gangster Tales . . . Nauseating Neptunian Novels . . . Smoking Six-Gun Stories. . . Ah! There it is—PLANET STORIES! The usual cover by Mart—*no!* It's by someone else. Hmmm. Pretty good, too. Nice coloring, yeah. Well, lo and bejabbers! Fox really turned out a swell hunk o' writing this time, Ed! *Sword of the Seven Suns* was as good a novel as I've read for many an ish. By all means keep this guy coming—he's good.

Also *Princes of Chaos*. It was sort of a combination of Burroughs and Brackett. Good, wot? In fact you had a good issue all around. For a change. Four new artists, I see.

Beyond the Yellow Fog was quite good. *Red Witch of Mercury*, *The Great Green Blight*, *The Blue Venus*, and now BTYF . . . hmmm. . . What's next—*The Magenta Monster of Mars?* (*The Beige Bums of Barsoom—yuk—Ed.*) Anyway, McDowell can't keep this up forever. He'll run out of colors!

The rest of the "thrilling space-tales" were also fine. *Final Glory* by Hasse was swell. Clever idea.

Well, well, Fox, Rocklynn, Bradbury, and McDowell—quite a line-up!

And now to Ye Olde Vizi . . . the Mad Chad gets First with some excellently expressed sentiments. As usual, Coslet gets Second and Wheaton takes Third. Nice letter, Jimmy!

Sachs has a good idea about a Sun God series. An excellent character (not Sachs—I mean Tyr). At any rate, more Fox!

Oh yeah, by the way, swell pic for SOTSS and BTYF. Especially "Sword."

In ending, let me plead on bended tendrils for Hamilton, Bond, Brackett, *ad infinitum*. (I don't know *what* it means, boys, but it *looks* funny.)

Sincerely,

LIN CARTER



You heard me—the EDITOR!

GIMME SOME OF THEM PINK RUBLES!

P. O. Box 364,
Cullendale, Arkansas

PLANET'S LUGUBRIOUS POLYP:

(you said so yourself)

Just to keep the ball rolling that Bruce Walton started, Hank Elsner shoved, and Norton and Snearly almost fumbled, I will put in my two cents' worth.

The status quo of society may not remain intact, but there has been no noticeable change in human nature from the earliest history to the present time. So, I can see no hope for any change for the future. All of history is a continual struggle between the Haves and the Have-nots. The power mad Alexanders, Caesars, Hitlers, etc., have taken advantage of that from the beginning of time. There never has been a one-man dictatorship. They all have to have support. Of course, one man may control the ruling organization by having his pawns in the key positions, but even then he has trouble keeping his finger on the pawns. Look at the purges within the Nazi party and in Russia.

Ironically, it doesn't seem possible to have efficient operation of anything without centralized control and power. This power is generally used in a dictatorial manner to the best interest of the Ins. This same centralized power, specialization,

and the regimentation of poor old John Q. Citizen is the very thing that eliminates the possibility of space pirating, simply by controlling all the possible bases from which to operate.

Money, as we know it, based on a metallic standard, may pass away. But there always will be some medium of exchange. Money of itself is not wealth. It can only be exchanged for wealth, such as land, buildings, services, food, clothing, equipment, supplies, etc. Even in Russia, where everybody owns everything and nobody owns anything, they still use money. They work for wages, even as you and I. And the wage scale varies not only between job classifications but between individuals doing the same jobs. Old man Joe pays them what they are worth and not one pink ruble more.

So you see, as long as there is wealth to be owned and exchanged, and more than one person to own, exchange, and consume it, there will be greed and corruption. For example, Christ introduced a system one might call the United Order. This was a communal ownership of all property. Unfortunately, he did not stay long enough on this world to get the folks firmly established in the project. Contemporary history records the fact that this one principle drew converts like a slot machine does nickels. Most of them did not even own enough rags to cover their nakedness. Naturally, they were more than willing to share what they had with those who had more. The main obstacle to this movement was the fact that the participants promptly plopped down on their hunkies and ate up all the wealth the more affluent members had supplied. That was the end of that, and it was almost the end of Christianity.

Space flight, if and when it comes, will be developed either from war pressure, economics, or both. If from war pressure, you automatically have your space war. If from economics, it will have to be the interested large corporations that will have to do the job—simply because they are the only ones that control or can promote enough wealth to foot the bill. And you can be sure they will get all there is to be had out of the deal. They will insist on government blessed monopolies through iron-bound franchises before they risk very much capital on such a venture. There you have a foundation for business warfare on anything but a penny-ante scale.

I suggest that Brer Hank take a trip through a coal-mining district or an oil-boom town before he repeats the statement that space miners will not be a hard-drinking, rough and tumble, diard bunch that will fight you at the drop of a hat—and drop the hat for you. It may be that automobiles are made in Detroit by pushing buttons, but minerals just don't come out of the ground that way. Steam shovels don't seem to be able to tell the difference between pay-dirt and common rock. There has to be a MAN to run it. Five will get you ten that these men won't be a bunch of panty-waists.

I am in agreement that one man Solar System-, world-, or even asteroid-savers will be out of order in the future, and should be eliminated from the stories we are getting today. More likely, it will be the giant organization against an equally huge opponent. On the other hand, if human cussedness does its worst with the crude atomic power we now have at our disposal, it will be man to man in the most primitive combat, or maybe just nothing at all.

Yours very truly,

DAN WILHITE

SIGLER SETS US STRAIGHT

1028 N. Broadway,
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

I would like to suggest to Emmett McDowell that he study a little mathematics before he writes any more stories. In *Beyond the Yellow Fog* he has it down that the shortest possible time for the trip from Venus to Jupiter would be one year. Then he has the ship capable of accelerating at five gravities and in the story it was accelerated at one gravity for at least eight hours.

One gravity for eight hours would give a speed of 175.6 miles per second. Assuming that the minimum distance between Venus and Jupiter is five hundred million miles, that would enable them to cover it in 806.75 hours, or about thirty-three and two-thirds days. Since the action of the story depended upon a year for an ordinary voyage, that threw the whole thing off. (*Edwin, you're breaking my heart.—Ed.*)

There was one unusual point about it. The dame landed in the clink. But why did the author have to throw in so many unnecessary curves? It gave the impression that readers of *PLANET* are the type who haunt the newsstands looking for copies of those gay *Parce* magazines and hurry home with them to sit up after midnight drooling over the pictures. (*We hadn't quite realized we were so rotten.—Ed.*)

Tell Vasti (*Vestal—Ed.*) the next time he draws a sword to take a good look at one first. The one he had the hero swing in *Sword of the Seven Suns* would have been more dangerous to the hero than to the gazabos he was trying to carve.

Incidentally, what was the sense of the author going through all that rigmarole about how the hand was held on the sword? It would have been far more sensible and self-explanatory to say that the hilt was the key and let it go at that.

What I would like to know is how did you wear Ray Bradbury away from his naked dames long enough to write *Rocket Summer*? That certainly showed traces of original thought. In fact, it was good.

One more question. When are your artists going to quit giving the chickens they draw clothing that doesn't fit the time and the occasion? This business of having chickens with hides of asbestos and proof against all thorns is just too improbable.

Respectfully,

EDWIN SIGLER

JELLY BEAN? TURTLEBACK?

161 6th Ave. W.,
Seaside, Oregon

DEAR EDITOR:

Stop the presses! Hold the mag! Norton's here to chew the rag!!!

Egad! Gardner, the ol' Fox (muffled groans from the cheering section at this point), finally has relented. Did he read my letter last issue or something? This time the hero kills his men by the hundreds at a time. 'Tis more than I expected. I thank you.

Beyond the Yellow Fog. . . The title's a bit misleading, is it not, Paul? It was really quite readable, old jellybean, with just the right amount of muscles rippling along under the hero's mustard-plaster. . . What's that, Paul? That's a chest-protector? Well, one would never know it. Why, the girl is wearing more on her chest

than he is and besides. . . Yes, old turtle-back, I shall cease and desist. Now just run around to the butcher's and return that cleaver.

The only yarns worth tearing apart were the novels and the novelette. The shorts were good, on the whole, but nothing exceptional. I find that most of your stories are like that, Paul. Easy to read and enjoy, yet nothing to tear your hair about. Neat but not gaudy. Keep them that way and you may be assured of a customer in the person of one B. Norton.

But, on to the *Vizigraph*. I'd like to give Adell Worthen a good reason why Chad Oliver gets an original more often than the rest. Reading his letter in the latest *PLANET* (along with mine, if anyone's interested), I find that Chad can write a good entertaining letter with intelligent, constructive criticism mixed with good sophisticated humor. Personally, I envy the boy for his intelligence.

The letters. . . No wonder Sneary is a hermit, if his English is as bad as his spelling. . . Shades of my old Lit course! (*Please sit down, Norton. Sneary is a genius.—Ed.*)

I like Coslet's letter, don't you, Paul? Chatty, isn't he? I vote Coslet on number one this time, with me—that's BBNorton—running a close second and W. R. Ford to show. Mr. Ford seems to go at Snedecker's angle so much more intelligently that I am almost agreeing with him. But, as the bachelor said to the serving-maid, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" (*Dear Post Office: Should I have printed that?—Ed.*) And I say a pox on those who would oppose La Vizi.

BOB NORTON

THE HERMIT IS DEAD—
LONG LIVE RICK SNEARY!

2962 Santa Ana St.,
South Gate, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is just a letter of thanks. A thing few fans need or feel like doing. First for using my letter in the last issue. Then thanks four times for the four suggestions you carried out so completely. No. 1, full addresses. No. 2, add in back of mag. No. 3, larger Feature Flash and about Ray Bradbury. No. 4, a better cover artist. And he is better. I and a friend of mine agreed (and we came to this conclusion separately) that it is the best cover *PLANET* has had since Fall 1942. The less you have on the cover the richer it looks. And for my money this looks swell. It even matched the story pretty well. Keep Anderson at all cost. I'll personally fight off anyone that says diff. Only Finlay would be better, and I doubt that you will get him.

Best story of the issue was *Rocket Summer* by my boy Bradbury. It was an easy choice. Despite the fact that it could never happen in our mad little world it was beautiful. Somehow he makes you feel for a brief moment the emotions of the person he is writing about. It doesn't come up to *Million Year Picnic*, but it is near. Anyone that knows good writing (not that I do) will like it. He could be another Nelson Bond.

Second would be *Distress Signal*. Very unusual. Very good. You can count on Rocklynnne for something good.

While I write I might as well vote on the letters. Chad should have first for that swell letter, but he wins too often, so No. 1, Rick Sneary. (Well I enjoyed reading it). No. 2, W. R. Ford and No. 3, Adell Worthen. (You said "He," by your notes?) She sounds good.

This is too late to be used as I have been busy. But I just wanted to write and say thanks.

I am no longer a hermit I am glad to say. I now have two fan friends living nearby, and I get to see them about every other week. We are even thinking of forming a club. And we all like PLANET, though we disagree on some of the other mags.

Oh yes, find enclosed some wood. It is only a little, but maybe you can add a page to the Viz. (Sweet! We ground that five-inch twig up fine—and it is now this very part of the page on which your letter is printed!—Ed.)

Yours Fenly,

Sruoy Yincf,

RECK SNEARY

PIX BUM, EDITOR A BUM

Delray Beach, Florida
P. O. Box 1467,

DEAR EDITOR:

Payne, I ain't gonna love you, no more. After all the hard work I went to, you didn't even bother to print my letter. That was my good stationery, too. My ego has been hurt. Oh, well, maybe I'll do better this time. Next time, though, I'll sick my grulzaks on you. You have been warned!

And now for the Spring issue of PLANET. Roll out the story-rating machine! Put in the magazine, and turn it on. The result is something like this:

1. *Rocket Summer*. First by a long, long way. Bradbury has made a very fine story, indeed. It is realistic, and intelligently written.

2. *Sword of the Seven Suns*. Good adventure STF. How about a sequel, Fox?

3. *Final Glory*. An original idea, and I liked it. I think humans would be more advanced in names, social conduct, and whatnot over five hundred years from now. It's a pretty thin point to kick over, though!

The other stories were about the same. None of them were really bad. *Planet of Creation* was interesting. *Scrambled World* had a good idea, but it was spoiled. The other two were mediocre. *Beyond the Yellow Fog* was second-rate detective fiction in a STF setting. Poor.

And now the artwork. Ah, yes, the dear old artwork. . . . The cover was fair. No nudes. But how about a nice BEM, or just a plain M? There hasn't been one on the cover for the last three or four issues. If you do put one on the cover, try and make it a good one.

The interior decoration was all pretty poor. Come on, Ed, how about some good space scenes or good action pictures, instead of the junk you now have. Rubimor's work would be better if he didn't make his people quite so large. But it's spoiled in the printing, as the pulp paper blurs it up. The pic for *Distress Signal* was fair, that for *Rocket Summer* pretty good, the first one, not the one on p. 50. The one for *Planet of Creation* was fair, that for *Sword of the Seven Suns* poor, ditto the rest, except for the one for *Princess of Chaos*, which was the best one in the issue. I liked the memoriam for H. G. Wells very much.

The Vizigraph! That collection of insane and insane geniuses, egotistical idiots, mad scientists (look who's talking), and what have you. Mr. Payne, I don't think yours is the best letter column in the business. You've got some original ideas yourself, haven't you? (Or have you?) Recently I bought some old PLANETS from an-

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other fan. Been looking them over. When Mr. Peacock was editor, he'd reply to each fan in the form of a letter. Even C. Whitehorn printed a reply at the bottom of each letter. But you, you lazy bum, don't even bother to do that. (*Less editor, more fans, we say!*—Ed.)

Chad Oliver had the best letter. I'm sorry to hear that we aren't going to have any of his letters around for a while. Oliver, for my money, is the best letter hack in the business. Second place goes to "Coswal," and third to Lin Carter. I am forming a society! Its name will be the Society for Collecting Funds to Buy Rick Sneary a Dictionary. (The SCFBRSD). Honestly, the guy has some good remarks, but how can anyone be expected to take his letters seriously, when they run across such gems as "scattered, reather, engens," etc., *ad infinitum!* W. R. Ford can go stick his head in a bucket of H_2SO_4 . (Sulfuric acid to the unlearned.)

Well, I'm already over the three-page limit, but since this is small paper, maybe I'll get by with it. (*It's two-page and you're not.*—Ed.)

Goodbye, old thing,

GUERRY BROWN

NEW USE FOR OLD POGO-STICK

501 East Lincoln
Wellington, Kansas

DEAR ED:

As I was bobbing along on my pogo-stick the other day, musing over the occurrences of the past annum, I came by chance to a queer little book shop.

It was lodged back in a cranny in which a large man would have been stuck 'til he grew thin. The doors were rather ornately decorated with second hand woman's lingerie.

Thinking, perchance, I might happen upon an old volume of occult loor, or maybe some French pornography, I dismounted in the easiest manner possible (fell flat on my), and essayed to enter.

The doors, however, were tightly barred, so, cuddling the stock of my trusty pogo-stick against my cheek, I calmly zapped the lock. The doors swung open with an ominous groan on inky blackness.

Calmly I stepped forward—and slipped on the second-hand corpse of a wheeled zipulfurter. Having again landed on my now sensitive posterior I made no attempt to rise, but remained calmly seated on the floor, in the meanwhile delineating the ancestry of some unknown person.

In the darkness of the interior there was suddenly a glowing red spot about the size of a cigarette glow. The more I elucidated about the unknown person the larger it got, finally assuming the size and shape of a man.

"Did you call me?" it inquired in a Milque-toast voice.

Looking up, I discovered the second best devil of all Hell, Beelzebub. To my surprise he was quite a beaten looking creature. I had met him once before in 1610 when I was a necromancer.

His once flame-red fur was bedraggled and spotty besides being gray at the roots. His claws were chewed back to the quick and his eyes had lost luster and were dark-rimmed.

"What in Hell happened to you?" Quoth I.
"Really I couldn't help it," he said, hanging his head at arms length in the custom of all accomplished demons. "It's these STF fans. All of them go to hell, and I simply can't satisfy them.

No matter what torture the Satanic Institute thinks up they simply laugh and say its 'old hat'."

I nodded my head in sage agreement and then bent forward to whisper in his ear.

"Oh, easily," he said.

He vanished in a puff of smoke. After a short interval the tiny glow appeared again and then he was before me holding out the slightly singed copy of PLANET I had requested.

So that's how it happens every time.

First for the stories. *Rocket Summer* gets my award for all time literature. It's not good, it's damn near perfect. *Atomism* is second, but lagging far behind. *Scrambled World* almost tied up second, but not quite. *Sword of the Seven Suns* is fourth, and it is good. The rest made about the same impression on me, so let's say they are all tied for fifth.

Give Lin Carter first choice on those originals for that piece of versifying. Bradley, Robert A., second, in spite of his lousy Latin. And, just to keep her company, send your worst BEM to Adell Worthen.

Can PLANET use some Mss? If so expect some outlandish yarns and tall tales in the next mail. (*Good!*—Ed.)

E. A. MCKINLEY

HOW'D THIS ONE GET BY?

208 West 7th Street
Bicknell, Indiana

DEAR EDITOR:

This is to be just a short note to tell you I think PLANET STORIES is perfect in every way, except that the stories are becoming a leetle cheesy. . . .

Scientifically yours,

DONALD LEE FOX

LET'S NOT OGLE THE BEMS

96 Bridge Street
Manchester, N. H

Hi, PAUL:

Just finished reading the Spring issue of PS. You really have a magazine there. I've found it better than any of the others that come out on the newsstands every month. Though it is too bad your PS doesn't come out every month; you'd really be offering all the other mags some competition. Since I returned to civilian life I have amassed a huge stack of mags (I have two piles four- and a half feet high), but, very sincerely, you have a great magazine.

And *Sword of the Seven Suns* really deserves first place in the issue. I don't see why so many fans criticize the artists who draw the women in it; they're supposed to read the printing, not ogle the BEM's. Sure hope your mag would come out monthly, but, if it's not possible, I'll wait for the Summer issue.

I'm so tired of reading a cute bit like this: "Foo Gha had just finished a very boring session with Gha Gha, the overlord from Ryreg, even though he was his father. So he went to the baths, and immersed himself in the scented waters. The water on the planet was acquired by a trying process that took up many hours. They were mosquito tears, a winged insect that was left over from Terra . . ." Phooey, on stuff like that.

Well, here's to more stories and a long life to PLANET STORIES. My opinions on rating the stories are:

- 1—*Sword of the Seven Suns*, by Gardner F. Fox.
 2—*Rocket Summer*, by Ray Bradbury.
 3—*Princess of Chaos*, by Bryce Walton.
 4—*Atavism*, by Eric Fennel.
 5—*Final Glory*, by Henry Hasse.
 6—*Scrambled World*, by Basil Wells.
 7—*Beyond the Yellow Fog*, by Emmett McDowell.
 8—*Distress Signal*, by Ross Rocklynne.
 9—*The Vizigraph* (by youse guys.—Ed.)
 10—*Planet of Creation*, by Chester S. Geier.

And also your cover by Anderson. A lovely gown on the gal. Who was her designer? (She made it up herself—out of whole cloth.—Ed.)

Sincerely,

JOSEPH GRIMARD

SOME STORM AND STREIFF . . .

DEAR EDITOR:

548 North Dellrose
Wichita 6, Kansas

Well I suppose you have all been waiting with bated breath for my return to the Vizigraph. (Yeh! with bated breath . . . they didn't dare breathe or the stench would have knocked 'em cold!) With this cute (?) beginning I shall comment on the Spring 1947 PLANET STORIES. (Rah!)

The cover was very nice. Do my eyes deceive me or was it really drawn by Anderson? The dame was neat! Well, on to the stories. . . . *Beyond the Yellow Fog* . . . "behind a stinking title lies a very good story" (that's Streiff). Give it second place. . . . pic on pages 2-3 excellent! Keep that Rubimor . . . he is very good. P. 27, ditto. *Distress Signal* was a very mediocre story. I see PLANET has graduated from the thud and blunder story to the extra-spatial type. Out of the nine stories, five were extra-earth; the others, save one, were not even of the off-earth variety. The pic on p. 35 wasn't too bad . . . the only Martin in the bunch . . . I remember the time when the whole thing was Martin . . . Gad!!! *Rocket Summer* was a very neat story; the pics weren't bad, either. The one on pp.44-45 was Doolin, wasn't it? (Youse.—Ed.) The one on p. 50 was also pretty good. *Planet of Creation* was a stinker; the man on p. 52 looks like one of the Finley mob. . . . Now to the No. 1 story. . . . Fox duz it again with *Sword of the Seven Suns*. The pic on pp. 58-59 was super . . . who drew it? (Vestal.—Ed.) *Scrambled World* was cute but corny . . . if a thing can be . . . more of Wells who drew the illo . . . Rubimor? (Youse.—Ed.) *Atavism* sounds like a story I might write . . . (awful!) (shh, quiet!—that's enuf outta yuh!). The illo st— well . . . pcuwwww!!! *Princess of Chaos* was good at first but got hackneyed toward the end. . . . I liked it anyway, though. The pic on pp. 102-103 was cute . . . I seem stuck on that word (ouch!) (quiet!) P. S.'s FEATURE FLASH . . . I liked them both, but this idea of ousting fan stuff . . . (I'll bet you love him for what he sed ish before last). Gad! and for that work I didn't even get an original . . . I DEMAND A RECOUNT . . . oh, well, I can dream, can't I???? Now to the Depths . . . otherwise known as the Vizigraf. Chad Oliver cheats. I know he does! (Not that he's accusing anybody about anything or nothing like thaaat!) Lin Carter's letter was a fan letter of the usual (crummy) (look you, look your

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parenthesis shut or else!) fan letter. Thank you, Coslet . . . my deepest gratitude . . . and —oh yes—I need some more material for MNL (this gets cut out no doubt!) (no doubt). (*We don't get it.—Ed.*) Ford . . . hmmm . . . isn't he the one who makes all those Studebakers? I thought so. Gad! Me, a master yet . . . He sez that me and tomwin shud visit a psychiatrist . . . why? Every one in the neighborhood knows I'm a green giraffe anyway, no why kid 'em? For James Wheaton's generous remarks I should award him a Chesshood in the Order of Ghoul, but Rehm might not like it . . . he has a monopoly on that field, ya know. (*What goes on here?—Ed.*) As to a la Sneary, I, too, like Gifford. It seems very odd that no one has guessed it before, because it's very obvious that this Sneecker character was dreamed up by the editor (*Oh, yeah?—Ed.*) to liven up the Vizigraf. That one letter pixie Sachs refers to was mine, wasn't it, Harley? Sounds like my personal style. Adell Worthen??? That's almost (almost, that is) as bad as Telis Streiff. And Norton didn't even mention why he likes Fox so well. Now on to other business. I'm sorry if I insulted Bradley's sense of knowledge; I just went through the dictionary picking out words and strung them together. I happened to be glancing through Lunacy the other day and noticed an article as to what the consequences would be if your initials had been PEP, PIP, POP, or PUP; the author noted that the fans would feel very homey if they could address their letters Dear Pop. Or how much of a lift it would be to write, Dear Pip, or Dear Pep. Well, that's all of my inane burbling for this trip.

1st place—Tom Jewett. 2nd place—Harley Sachs. 3rd place—Rick Sneary.

Telisincerely,

TELIS STREIFF

WHEATON'S IN FOR A BEATIN'!

23 Montclair Ave.,
Verona, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

So you're a lugubrious polyp, huh? Well, I'm not surprised, since you can't tell what shape an editor will assume. If you're sad about the paper shortage, though, I think I can help you out. I have enclosed a piece of balsa wood for the express purpose of making paper. (*See Sneary letter—ditto you.—Ed.*) If this is not enough, why don't you collect all the pencil sharpener shavings in the building and use them? A brilliant suggestion, if I do say so myself.

Aside from the usual differences between the cover and the story, the spring cover was pretty good. Somehow, I got the idea from the story that only three men at a time could attack the mesa, but the cover is a bit different in that respect. My goodness, that red-head is just loaded down with armor, isn't she? I don't see how she can stand up wearing all that heavy stuff! I guess she really isn't standing, though, she's just leisurely reclining on a rock while she squirts some violet flame around. I like the new formation which is a nice improvement.

I noticed a few lovely phrases while reading the mag, the first of which is on page 77. To wit, "The hot sunlight drove new strength into *hack-weary arms*." There we have the perfect synonym for fandom! The only thing is, I never seem to get new strength into my *hack-weary arms*. The other thing I'd like to mention is the

opening sentence of Walton's *Princess of Chaos*. Quote, "Mol jar planted his columnar legs wide apart beside the dying saurian and blinked blood and sweat from his eyes." Ye gods, I thought Walton could do better than that! That sentence reminds me of a similar sentence in the introduction of Conklin's *The Best of Science Fiction*. That sentence was, "Sool Darm opened his many-lidded eyes with reptilian anticipation and lowered his pointed head to gaze on the lithe but richly-round figure of the girl who lay unconscious at his feet." It was given as an example of how the stories in some STF mags begin. But I never thought that PLANET would stoop to that! Gahh!

Now for the stories. *Beyond the Yellow Fog* was pretty good. It's strange, though, that you didn't mention McDowell on the cover. The picture on pages two and three is a bit confuzzin. Whose leg is that down in the corner? (*Man should be on floor and pic foot of page. We slipped.—Ed.*)

Mr. Payne, I ask you. Have you ever seen a flame dawdling? Neither have I, but on the content's page you have just that under the title, *Sword of the Seven Sun*. (*Should be Flame.—Ed.*) Sworda peculiar, what? (Yak, yak, that's a killer!) Ahem, anyway, the story was pretty good. By the way, do you write those overly descriptive phrases under the titles? (*Yes.—Ed.*) In the first story nowhere can I find Murdock "coldly eyeing the evil miasma," or "bracing himself for unguessable horror." So what if he dreams about his past life, is that unguessable horror? (*Aw, cut it out, will ya, Jimmy?—Ed.*)

Princess of Chaos was just plain chaos, SO and all. But leave us trudge onward to the "thrilling space-tales."

Distress Signal wasn't particularly stinking, but it wasn't too hot, either. So Rex goes back to the planet to die, huh? Well, that shows that he must have had some conscience. *Rocket Summer* was okay, but I don't agree with President Stanley. It was inevitable that the rocket would come, so what was the use of his postponing it for a few years? *Planet of Creation* was okay, too, but how would the Uggolians capture any "Errthmen" in an interplanetary war? *Scrambled World* wasn't so hot. The idea wasn't bad, but the story just didn't click with me. *Final Glory* was a nice story, but I think that key phrase could have been better. *Atavism*, stinko.

Ahal! La Vizi was pretty good this time with Oliver heading it with a serious letter. I won't say a serious letter "for once," since that would sound like Chad never wrote anything but funny ones. Anyway, good luck, Chad, and maybe we'll be hearing about you on the sports pages in a year or two. Sachs has the right idea about those ads, and apparently his sage words have not gone unheeded, since I don't see any in with the stories. Looking back at the Winter issue, I note that Sneecker's letter has no address with it, which just about confirms my suspicions that it is a figment of your imagination. (*Now look! We gave all the address there was!—Ed.*) I guess you got the results you wanted, though. I'm glad you printed my letter, though I think I've improved my writing since then. There's too doggone much time between issues of this mag! I'd practically forgotten I'd even written a letter until I saw it. Yike! I'm down to the bottom. I give up. Chad first, Coslet second, and Sneary third.

Sincerely,

JIMMY WHEATON

NO! NOT ANOTHER SNEDECKER!

Henrietta, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

As I glance over the last two copies of PS, it seems to me that, as in a great many other STF magazines, the original aim of Science-Fiction (i.e.—to set forth fiction based for the most part on actual facts) has been sadly warped and twisted. Whereas, once, the STF story could be depended on for a fairly accurate forecast of the future, or an entertaining tale of the past or present, it seems to have degraded to a "love romance," in which the science factor is neglected or left out completely. I cite two horrible examples:

1. Passages such as this (I quote from the Spring issue, page 26): "His arms went around her waist. He pulled her to a seat beside him and kissed her roughly." Migawd! Now I'm not entirely condemning the "love" interest in a story, for it lends added interest, but when I want to read a "love" story, I'll look under such a title. And when I read a story labeled Science-Fiction I expect it to be just that.

2. Science factor (page 36): "as the sub-etheric warp hurled them . . . at several times light-speed." Please explain what is "a sub-etheric warp" and how it is possible to travel "several times light-speed." I think Mr. Einstein would have a few words to say on that. (Dr. Einstein has yet to hear of a "sub-etheric warp" and, as for speeds in excess of light, would probably confine himself to asking "How?") Very little of STF is possible with present day science; the present day was impossible a hundred years ago.—Ed.)

Re the Vizigraph—from reading the letters I picture the average fan as being a gibbering idiot who is about two steps in front of the keepers. Gone (at least from PS) are the days of constructive criticism. Each fan seems bent on airing his opinion, no matter what! How about some debates on such things as the Einstein Theory, time traveling, etc. (Okay, let's go!—Ed.) Some of your readers understand these things, even if those who write all the time don't.

I noticed that Herb Snedecker seems to have called down the wrath of the Vizigraph upon himself. I'd like to ask one question: Does the truth hurt? It would seem so. I also advocate removal of the Vizigraph, unless you can get some letters written by responsible people, with the aforesaid debates. This (if it's published) will bring an awful howl from the fans who would fight mightily any attempt to smother their "intellectual growing pains" (with apologies to H.S.).

Think this one over, too.

Disgustingly yours,

JAMES MEADE

(James, because you forgot to give your street address, you don't exist. We merely dreamed you up. And don't you forget it!—Ed.)

ANOTHER ADMIRER!

San Antonio, Texas

PLANET'S LOATHSOME PAYNE-IN-THE-NECK:

The first PLANET which I read was the Summer, 1946, issue. It was good. Each issue since then was better than the last. And then along came this Spring, 1947, issue. It stinks.



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If FICTION HOUSE wishes *PLANET* to be a better magazine, it should: (a) get more Bradbury, (b) get rid of Payne-in-the-neck.

Angrily yours,

MICHAEL WIGODSKY

LUNAR PAPERS, PLEASE COPY

165 N. 17th Street,
East Orange, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

The Spring, 1947, issue of *PLANET* had a very significant story by Ray Bradbury, *Rocket Summer*. Bradbury is to be congratulated on handling a touchy theme very well.

In fact, there are many people today who are trying to escape and retreat from reality. They never realize that, to retreat, also means a slipping back into the earlier stages of development. We have had our book burnings, our inquisitions, our laws to prevent the development of science, technology, and civilization, and one and all were done on the basis of protecting and helping mankind from some disaster, usually on the excuse of protecting man from himself.

Now the situation depicted by Bradbury could very easily become fact. The excuse given in the story that people need educating to understand our mechanical and technical world is quite true, but why injure and prevent things that will help? I base my statements upon the following facts: Four factors are badly needed, namely, an uplift and hope to the imagination of man due to the pessimistic outlook engendered by the war and the use of atomic energy, release population pressure in Europe and Asia, new lands for agricultural development, and a refuge in time of danger.

Now the rocket to the moon would be the first step in complete control and colonization of the solar system, according to the story. Let us grant that premise. The outlook of conquest of several undeveloped worlds would give many people hope that life can be built up there and would inflame their imaginations that science and technology can solve their problems, which they have been doing for the past fifty years far better than any other system to date. Secondly, new lands would enable about a hundred million people from Europe and twice that many from Asia to settle and

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give Eurasia a chance to smooth out their political problems without being cursed by social population problems. Thirdly, the food problem, and that of our vanishing source of supply of many metals, would be solved if the planets of the solar system were habitable. Even if it required strenuous efforts of our technology to make Mars, Venus, and some asteroids habitable, such a job would give work, new hopes, new dreams, and realization to millions of people. And, last, if we have an atomic war, the only hope to save our civilization is to have it dispersed—preferably off the earth!

Most of the Western World will be destroyed in an atomic war but if there were colonies over the Solar System, the chance of bringing some culture through would be enhanced. Of course, there are many political and religious groups who earnestly desire for civilization to be destroyed. They think that in the black-out their particular organizations, which are already on a militaristic, tight system of control, would have a good chance to dominate.

We cannot run away from life, nor pretend we are saving people by preventing advances in the field of science and technology. I would strongly advocate the suggestion of really educating people, but not by throwing them back into the Middle Ages, because once you get a strong set-back such as depicted in the story, the reactionaries, those who hate civilization and science, will really go to town and do everything they can to throw the world for a loss.

Therefore, I vote Bradbury's little short story as being one of the most significant short stories to appear in *PLANET*, for the simple reason that I have met a great many people who would relish stopping every form of advance and are aching for public support to get started. Let us solve our problems, rather than run away from them.

Sincerely,

THOMAS S. GARDNER

A MODEL LETTER!

Lower right-hand desk drawer
Midtown, Manhattan

DEAR EDITOR YATATA:

Ya got a fine mag dere, chum—ony I ain't got no time t' read it.

Stong—

PLP

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